フェノメノ
ナニモナイ人間
☆星海社FICTIONS
一肇
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Prologue

I had no motivation whatsoever to do anything at all.

I believe that happens to everyone. On a cloudy day, or at the beginning of the week, you just don't have the energy to do anything, and you feel as if you just want to lie down and melt away, is what you might call it. A feeling that the entire scenery in your vision is devoid of reality, and the sound of cars, the chirping of birds, and the sounds of people talking leak out from a world that has nothing to do with you.

That was exactly what I felt right now. My consciousness was vague as if a thin membrane had been stretched over me. As if there were two of me, two outlines overlapping with each other. Somewhere in the back of my head, I thought, “It would be quite dangerous if I stayed like this”, but when I thought that, my body didn’t move, and I couldn’t think of any other option except to just stay still. In the first place, if I did anything other than stay still, then something unthinkable would definitely happen. To begin with, the place I stood was abnormal.

That’s right – right now, I was…

I stood alone on the roof of a building somewhere, on top of the safety handrail.

A rusty handrail a few centimeters in width. At the end of the railing, just above the 90-degree bend, I stood stock still with my legs slightly wide apart.

--And.

Just what… was I doing in a place like this?

I’d been thinking about it for a while, but I had no idea. When I

thought of it, I had no motivation to do anything whatsoever, so it was hard to get deep into my thoughts, but even so, I found it strange why was I here again, which was driving me crazy. At any rate, it had been almost an hour since I found myself standing on top of a rooftop handrail and thinking on it. About why was I in such a place.

The wind was blowing.

I could feel it.

I could also feel the rays of the sun. They gently shone down on me.

And underneath my feet – humans the size of miniatures walked on the footpath far below the building.

But did any of that matter? Each of them was probably out on some kind of errand, and even if that errand was insignificant and trivial to others, it was important to him or her—

…No. No, it was strange. That wasn't the problem at all. What should be more troubling than the problems of the humans far down below was my situation looking down on them from a place like this. I understood that. So, back to the main topic, why was I here in such a place? When and why did I come to a place like this? …And then I finally realized.

When? Why? No, more importantly—

Who was I?

How old was I? Was I a he? A she?[1]

…I couldn't remember anything. I had no memories. I couldn't recall anything, as if a transparent membrane went down and became cloudy. No matter how far I scraped, they weren't there, as if I were in a milky-white world. Nothingness. Everything that I should have accumulated, however small, was, right now, completely erased from within me. A sense of nothingness. Right now, I didn't even have a sense of existence. I had understood that the wind had been blowing for a while now, and yet, it barely even ruffled my hair.

I vacantly gazed at the palm of my hand.

It was someone's hand, slightly transparent. The fingers themselves were slender, but the hand was large. It seemed familiar. I must have washed my face with it, handled things with it, and tugged at someone's hand with it – but those memories were not there.

Suddenly, I wanted to cry, so I covered my face with hands, yet the tears never came. My feelings themselves were weak. My emotions didn't arouse spontaneously to the point where everything was inconsequential. I found no trace of my emotions beginning to swell, as if this was how it felt for feelings to fade.

As I covered my face—

Ah, that answer suddenly came to me.

…I see.

I was already dead.

For some reason, I ended up dead.

That's why everything was weak. Everything was in the middle of disappearing. It takes a little while for the dead to realize that they are dead, is what I read somewhere – no, did someone tell me that? I'm sure I knew that story from before. I still couldn't tell where I gained that information from, but it was probably correct. That's right, I was already dead.

Hahahaha, a dry laugh escaped me.

Anyway, I made some progress. It was such a relief just to know who I was, or rather, my condition. After that, I looked at the spectacle spread beneath my feet once more.

It was some place close to a station building. On my left hand was a familiar (or so I thought) colored train running, and on my right was a large sign that seemed to be that of a department shopping mall.

Countless buildings both big and small were lined up, and between them were cars, bicycles, and pedestrians going back and forth. Today, too, the world was normal. And it was no longer a world I was a part of. Even though I could see it right next to me, it looked to be a foreign country far, far away.

And… there was only one thing for a dead person to do.

Be it paradise, hell, the other world, or nirvana – whatever it was, it was to move on to the right place. They go somewhere that wasn't here. However, where that was, and how to reach there, I hadn't a clue. I suddenly understood that it was the thing I had to think of next – but, would that be the thing my thoughts would be stuck on from now on?

No… that was it.

Was that the reason I came to the rooftop of the building?

The reason I was looking down while standing on top of a guardrail?

In the cold recesses of my brain, I heard someone's voice.

--Die properly. You are still stuck halfway to this world.

After muttering these words…

I, or me, [2] someone who didn't know who they were – spread both arms, closed my eyes, kicked the handrail, and flew into the sky.

Case 00 – Chapter 1: M

It's obvious to say, but I, or me, or whoever I was, couldn't die. I was already dead, and that hypothesis was proved thus. I jumped from the building, lightly drifted down, and landed on the concrete where pedestrians walked back and forth. I had made an entrance like a hero in a Hollywood movie, however, not a single passerby showed any signs of surprise. I wasn't reflected in their eyes, and their legs passed through me.

Suddenly, I felt something bright flicker right above me, and I raised my head.

Far above the rooftop of the building I had been on just now – there was a strange cloud above in the sky.

No, rather than a cloud, something large and gray covered a part of the sky that was like a giant swirl of paint, and a beam of light shone from a gap in it. And, that light was aimed straight down at the handrail of the building where I had stood just now.

--Ah… Wasn't that the final call? If I had just waited there, wouldn't everything have ended?

In a panic, I searched for an entrance to the building in order to return to the rooftop, but it was already too late.

The bright light shining down from the sky gradually narrowed its point of focus as if to say it had 'lost the thing it was looking for'.

(Hey, wait for me. I'm right here. I'm dead here. Don't leave me behind.)

I tried to shout out loud, but the light in the sky contracted in the blink of an eye, and eventually disappeared.

I was in a daze for a while – then slowly collapsed to my knees. Even though I landed from the tip of my knees on the concrete, there was barely any pain or an impact. The weight itself was almost imperceptible. From then on, I just sat there on the ground and became hollow. I don't remember how long I sat there for. I felt no pain since I was dead, and I probably felt no hunger, or thirst. In short, it wasn't a problem if I did it for eternity.

I didn't know – I didn't know, but…

For the time being, I slowly thought it through.

'What should I do from here on', was the only thing I kept thinking about. There was no starting point. I thought I should first create a starting point, and first choose how to refer to myself in first person. I tried out various forms, but they all had their merits and demerits, so I chose the word '근'. It meant both 'Ore' and 'Onore', hmm, yes, that was fine.[3] Well then, what was I? I was a dead person. I must have ended up becoming the existence commonly known as a ghost or a spirit. I still couldn't remember the events that led me to this situation, but – that's right, I was… I was trying to do something. No, was I trying to meet someone? At any rate, it felt like I was in a rush to get somewhere. But I couldn't recall where that was, nor the reason why I was in a rush. Well, it would be meaningless even if I could recall. I was already dead, and if I had arranged to meet with someone, that person would still be alive, a dweller of the world I was no longer related to.

Alright, that's good. For the time being, merely defining myself as 'I' has greatly calmed me down.

But, however—

What was this sad wind that occasionally blew at the depths of my heart? When I try to recall the sight I saw just before my death, that sad wind blows in at my heart from somewhere. Someone's lonely, beautiful, face flickers before my eyes – The fact I would never see them again, no, that I wasn't even able to say goodbye to them, made me unbearably sad…

Thereupon, I shook my head. I was afraid that If I stayed buried in

my grief as someone who was dead, I would end up becoming one of the incomprehensible ‘monsters’.

Before I’d realized, night had passed, and morning came and went. That cycle kept endlessly repeating. And in that time, not a single person noticed me. Even though I was sitting in such a conspicuous place on the road in front of the station.

I stood up and tried to talk to the pedestrians passing by. However, no one lent my words an ear. I tried to dance. A sloppy dance in my own style. But, as expected, no one looked at me. I tried running with all my strength. People didn’t avoid me as I ran with a furious facial expression, nor did they even try. And as expected – I didn’t crash into anyone as I merely passed through people’s bodies.

Feeling foolish, I stopped in front of a commercial building. On the ground floor, there was a store window for a clothing store.

In a daze, I stood in front of it, when I realized. In the glass window, I could see the reflection of people passing by, yet I could not see my own. I, alone, was not part of that world.

『Ghosts are not reflected in mirrors.』

With sadness, I recalled such words I had once heard somewhere. And the reality painfully sunk into my heart more than I thought.

--I was nothing.

Leaning back against the wall of the building, I merely sat down in a daze.

I was practically homeless, but that was a fact. I was homeless for eternity. No, what was worse than being homeless was losing your memories, your sense of existence, with no end. There were things I thought I would do if I had an eternity of time – is what I felt I thought once. I felt like that would be to train in musical instruments, and to do sports training. But even that would all be meaningless

right now. Even if I learned how to do those things, there was no one who would be happy for me, and to begin with, I couldn't even touch organic objects (I could barely feel something when I touched it. I tried it with vending machines and such). Even though there was nothing to do, I had an eternity of time. I rolled helplessly in the midst of those endless thoughts.

In all likelihood – a week passed by.

I didn't exactly know how much time had passed. As expected, I felt neither hunger nor pain in my butt. Even pain might be a spice in this never-ending passage of time – I reached that sad conclusion, and despaired. That was because, in other words, time did not act on me alone. There were people going back and forth in front of my eyes right now, but they would eventually grow old and die. And they would be guided by that light and head off to some other world. But what about me? Would I just stay here like this? Shouldn't finding that light again be my number one priority? But my thoughts would always stop there. I hadn't seen that strange cloud that appeared in the sky at that time since then. I didn't know what I had to do to see it once more. I wanted to ask someone, yet I couldn't talk to anyone. There were so many people, yet I alone was separated from all of humanity.

『There is a ghost there.』

At the ends of my boundless thoughts, someone's words crossed my mind.

Huh? Where? I tried looking around, but there were only living people around me. There was no sight of anyone else who was as lost as I was. Or could it be that there were dead people mixed in with the living who I couldn't discern? Couldn't I tell if I saw a fellow ghost?

Hey, I'm dead as daylight!

I tried shouting out loud with all the strength I could muster.

However, no one looked at me. No one noticed my screams.

Before I'd realized, tears were streaming down my cheeks. I learned that even in death, tears came out, but my feelings stayed hazy. My tears alone spilled down as if they were someone's forgotten possession.

It's painful. Pain. Pain. Pain – it's too painful.

If things went on like this, I might end up bearing a grudge at something unrelated. I would end up gathering all the pent-up resentment here and there and turn into a terrible demon. Kill me, I prayed. God, devil, anything is fine, consume this body. Tear me apart, just take me away from here. Take me away from this bugged world where nothing happens, even if it's hell. I shouted out loud in tears, but as expected, nothing happened.

However, as the dull world bereft of color passed by in front of my eyes – it happened.

I felt something like a gaze.

I raised my head, and realized once more that it was early morning. The crowds of people going to work all headed towards the station, walking at a brisk pace. But when I tried to look closely around me, there was no one around who was looking at me. No one was paying attention to me.

But, I tried to stand up and look.

Right now, without a doubt, someone looked at me. It was for a brief instant, but someone realized my existence with an 'Ah'. I definitely felt that presence that went 'Ah'.

--Hey, please. If you can see me, then help me.

I shouted out loud, and started running. I stepped into the crowds of commuters. I drew my face up to their nose, be it woman or man, and exposed myself right in front of their eyeballs. But it was no use. I could faintly feel people's body heat, but I wasn't reflected in anyone's eyes.

Despite that, I ran in search of the someone who had noticed my existence. However, the sign of someone's "awareness" that I had felt earlier was gradually diminishing. I thought it might have been my misunderstanding – or my wishful delusion that raised my hopes.

I ran from one end of the street to the other, but there was no one who had taken notice of my existence.

I was alone once more.

Alone once more, I collapsed on the street.

○

Several days passed by once more. I had no sense of time anymore.

It was raining.

Since yesterday – no, was it the day before yesterday? For some time now, a lukewarm rain was falling down.

Perhaps because of this, there were far fewer people in front of the station than usual.

I had been lying in the middle of the street – on the crosswalk for a long time.

It was also the roundabout exit for buses, and from time to time, buses drove on top of me, but if there was no pain from being trampled by their giant tires, then there would be no death. It was the pedestrian crossing, and naturally, the pedestrian traffic was high. I was trampled by a lot of humans. Even so, I was glad to somewhat be able to feel the touch of someone. At times, I would see the pants of a short skirt wearing girl, but it didn’t make me feel anything. My feelings were becoming weaker. My heart was becoming less moved by things.

I merely lay on the ground, looking up at the cloudy sky.

I had the faint hope that if I kept looking up at the white sky, that light would someday fall down on me and take me somewhere.

At that moment, I felt it again.

--A gaze.

After about three days, I suddenly sat up. And then looked around me. However, as usual, even if the countless gazes of people around me looked in my direction, their gaze would go right through me.

--No, just now, I definitely….

Absentmindedly, without much expectation, I slowly turned my head around.

And then, I saw her. An elementary school student in front of a cell phone shop. She wore a bright red backpack, her beautiful black hair stretched down to her waist. With a fair complexion, that girl with startling facial features seemed to panic as she looked away from me. She broke into a half run from there, and I stood up in a hurry and tried to chase after her. That girl almost bumped into the crowds as she ran through the shopping arcade.

(--W, wait!)

I ran and literally slipped through the crowd as I chased after her. That girl would look back at times. And each time she did, she made eye contact with me. And then, after hurriedly looking away, she would increase her running speed.

--There was no doubt about it. This girl could see me.

(Hey…Hey, wait for me! You can see me, can't you? Then help me! I just want to talk to someone for five minutes! I'll go crazy if I don't talk to someone! I'm going to break down if I go on like this!)

I shouted out loud in tears, as I continued to run.

As her long hair swayed brilliantly, the girl continued to run.

Her red school bag bounces on her back, and her legs stretching out from her short skirt were filled with life.

--Why won't you help me? Why? Even though I'm in so much trouble. How can you be that cold? I'll do anything, just help me. I won't cause you any trouble, just a few words are enough, please just talk to me.

Thinking it over calmly, even a grown man would shit their pants and run scared if a dead person were to chase after them yelling such resentful complaints in tears. But I was just desperate at the time. I had finally found a human who could perceive me – the only hope I had found in this world of infinite loneliness. That's why, even though I felt awfully bad for the girl, I chased after her with all my strength. I was even willing to become a demon to achieve that end. And then, at the end of the shopping arcade, I caught up with the girl.

But – that girl had stopped in her tracks, had her hand on her knees, and was out of breath as she looked in my direction.

I wandered closer, but the child's gaze didn't catch my eye.

--Oh no.

I slowly approached the girl and waved my hand in front of her eyes. But her eyes didn't move. She still had a troubled expression, but she let out a sigh of relief, and after that, slowly began to walk again. I understood that this gesture meant that she had outrun me. However – that meant that in short, she couldn't see me anymore. She was running just now because she had definitely noticed me, but she couldn't see me anymore…? Was that how ghosts were? Could people who see them only see them in certain conditions and not see them in others? It can't be…

If that were the case, how could I make contact with that tiny minority of humans who could see me?

I endured the depressing feeling that made my knees want to collapse, and managed to raise my head somehow. The girl was waiting for the signal of a pedestrian crossing to change in color a

little further ahead. She took a glance back my way, but it seemed she did not see me in her vision, and this time she truly seemed relieved and started walking as soon as the light changed.

I was entranced by her back.

From that long, shiny hair that swayed at her back, I was on the verge of recalling something.

That might have been the reason why.

I, too, somehow began to walk.

I began to walk, trotting thirty or so meters behind the girl.

○

The girl's house was located on the outskirts of a suburb around a ten-minute walk away from the station.

It was still new, a fashionable western style house surrounded by a reddish-brown fence. On the other side of the fence was a small garden that looked to be well-kept. The girl opened the front door and entered, "I'm home". I hesitated for a moment, before I followed. I pressed my body against the front door, and slipped inside.

"Yo, welcome back, ○○."

On the other side of the entrance was a girl who looked to be of high school age, who cheerfully called out to her.

Her hair was a bob cut around shoulder-length, and her healthy-looking smile made her distinctly cute. Her cute qualities were completely different, but she was probably the girl's older sister. As if enticed by her smile, the young girl too, broke into a grin. And, for some reason – I was deeply moved by her smile. My heart was moved after a long time. It felt as if I had caught a glimpse of something truly precious. That might have been why, even though I should have

heard the girl's name, I didn't realize it in the moment.

"You're late, did something happen?"

The girl briefly hesitated in response to the question, before she shook her head and said no.

"Did you buy the tea on your way back?"

"Yes."

The girl nodded, and handed the package in her bag over to her sister.

"Ah—thanks. Well then, for the change… you can keep the hundred yen. Buy a notebook or something with it."

Hearing the words of her elder sister, the young girl happily nodded.

I watched that exchange behind the girl, but – why was it, I wonder? The tears that flowed in my eyes now were different than tears of loneliness or pain. Was I such a crybaby when I was alive? It was pathetic, but I didn't know why I was crying. At any rate, I was helplessly overjoyed, breathed a sigh of relief, and was thankful at this trivial family exchange.

"Put your bag away and wash your hands. We have dorayaki as a snack."

The girl trotted up the stairs to the second floor without pause.

I merely stood stock still at the entrance in a daze. Was it alright if I stayed here like this? I hesitated, but—no, at present the only one who barely perceived my presence, be it for an instant, was that girl. I had no idea what time I would be visible next, but, even so, if I were to make contact with that girl without scaring her, I might be able to discover the path I'm supposed to take. Thinking that, I felt remorseful, but decided to freeload in this house for a little while longer.

But, at that moment I heard a low growl at my feet.

I looked down to see it was a small dog with fluffy brown and black fur. Ermm… I think it was called a Yorkshire Terrier? I wasn't quite sure, but anyways, it was a small indoor dog. It was staring straight at me with its dark eyes and gnashing its teeth.

--Oh damn. Can it see me?

No matter how you slice it, there was no other choice besides rushing outside to get away from him. However – before I'd realized, I had crouched down, and was hugging the dog with all my might. Of course, my hands slipped through, but even so, I snuggled my body as close as possible, rubbing my face against it.

That's right – that dog was right now, without a doubt, the only existence in this world that could perceive me. I was so happy that it couldn't be helped. Perhaps my overflowing emotions reached it, the dog stopped growling, looked puzzled at first, before happily sticking out its tongue, and rolled down on its belly. It seems I was somewhat of an animal lover when I was alive. That gesture brought me to tears once more. I never thought I'd be this happy to have my existence accepted. I rolled down on the spot as well and played with the dog. No, but my hand still ended up slipping through as expected.

"…Leo? What's wrong with you?"

Hearing the dog's merry voice, the young girl's older sister came out of the kitchen, and stared in amazement.

(So you're called Leo?)

Still soggy with tears, I extended my hands to stroke Leo's body here and there. Even though I wasn't visible, Leo seemed to have understood me as he happily tumbled over and wagged his tail.

(Leo, thanks – I'm really grateful. You truly are my hope. Thank you--)

After that, I played with Leo until nightfall, and the young girl and her older sister chatted happily in the living room, watching TV as they ate dorayaki and drank tea. The girl was happily talking about

what had happened at school today, a new game she had learned from a good friend, and a seat change that was going to take place soon.

Eventually, the sisters' parents returned home, and from a glance, they seemed like good people.

The black framed glasses the father wore suited him well, and they went well with his prematurely gray hair. He was a little taller than me and wore a stylish suit that gave him the appearance of a being a salary man in some foreign company. The mother was a beautiful woman who often smiled, and the jeans she wore suited her for her age. Her bright and curly hair seemed to illuminate the surroundings, and she resembled the elder sister.

The two came back from work at roughly the same time, and after hugging the elder sister and young girl one after the other, patted Leo on the head. After that, the family of four sat on the table, and began to enjoy dinner. On that day, it was curry made by the older sister, and although I couldn't smell the aroma, the curry full of vegetables looked delicious enough to make my stomach growl even though I couldn't feel hunger.

The conversation was mostly dominated by the mother and the elder sister. The father interjected occasionally to show that he was paying attention. The young girl who perceived me – in other words, the younger sister was eating her food alone, as she happily watched the scene. When she was occasionally called upon to touch on a matter, she would hurriedly try to think of some comment, but her mother wouldn't wait on her answer and went, "Is this what you mean?" as she ended up leading the conversation. That seemed a little different than what the young girl wanted to say, but the girl readily nodded in order to escape for the moment. From there, the family burst into laughter. The young girl smiled slightly as well. I gazed at the family together with Leo from the couch a little further away, without being bored.

It seemed everyone in this family was quick-witted, and topics of conversation kept flying one after the other. And I got the impression that the young girl was a little slow to keep up with their conversations. Even so, the young girl looked happy. And that young

girl probably hadn't even realized the preciousness of her beautiful face yet. The elder sister and the mother were both pretty but, the young girl's well-featured face far surpassed them. Her skin was as white as pottery, and her facial features were like that of a western doll – that was, if anything, as if the girl was the only one in the family whose beauty was not in harmony with the family, driven by a baseless sense of insecurity.

Even so, when I thought a day would come when someone would wed this beautiful young girl, a strange jealously took root in me, even though I was not her father. That is how emotionally attached I had become to the family. There wasn't much I could do for this family as someone who was already dead, but there was a happy household here I at least wanted to continue watching over.

Even if I stayed as a ghost forever, I would be able to get by if I could stay close to this family. As I suddenly began to think that – an uncomfortable feeling reached my ears.

With a start, I looked around the room, and searched for the identity of the strange sensation I felt. A news program was playing on the large television in the living room, a male and female anchorperson were smiling and reporting on today's news. Their outfits – no, this television… something was strange about it. Barely having any memories, I could hardly remember why, but as I watched, I realized.

--That's right, in the world I was alive in, it felt like televisions were a lot thinner. Televisions with a large protruding back were only around when I was a child…That's right, the newscaster, in particular the female newscaster. The manner of her clothes, hairstyle, makeup and such, wasn't it somewhat old-fashioned?

Thereupon, the female newscaster began to speak.

〈--Now for sports news. In professional baseball, Hideki Matsui of the Tokyo Giants finally reached base in 50 consecutive games. Over the ocean in Major League Baseball, Hideo Nomo won his eighth game in a row, tying last season's record.〉

…Eh?

Matsui? Huh? His uniform looked somewhat different. When I was alive, he wasn't in the Giants anymore, having moved to the Major Leagues… and Nomo had already retired.

I stood up, went over to the newspaper spread on the living room table, and looked through.

"Fears of antitrust violations with the new Windows XP OS releasing this fall." "Interview with Takako Doi, leader of the Social Democratic Party." "Full house even in the absence of Takanohana."

Huh…Windows XP still hasn't released? It felt like Takako Doi wasn't party leader anymore, and Takanohana already retired and became a supervisor…

As I kept reading, something cold was falling on my back.

I was seized with terrible thoughts, and was starting to get worried, *woof*, Leo looked me, and I somehow managed to bear with it.

…No. Aren't my memories all fuzzy? If I was allowed to stay in this house for a while, my spirit might become more at ease. If I did that, then I'd remember various things, and that light might come for me once more.

…That's right, I should stop thinking about difficult things for now.

For the time being, I gave up on it all, and collapsed next to Leo once more.

"That was delicious."

My eyes suddenly opened at the sound of the elder sister's voice. It seems I had dozed off before I'd realized. Or rather, I realized that even ghosts sleep properly. I had been living a life filled with in anxiety up to the present, so I must have felt completely at ease. Was it because of a habit in past life? I rubbed my eyes and looked around to see that the family had all begun to leave their seats. The young girl and her sister began putting away the dinnerware and the mother had begun washing the dishes in the kitchen. The father went to the living room and sat down on the sofa, relaxing in front of the television. Leo jumped into his lap, as if waiting for him.

The elder sister disappeared to the bathroom, perhaps to clean the bath.

The young girl helped her mother for a while, but left for her room when her mother said, “It’s alright now, thank you.” For some reason I followed her.

The young girl’s room was right next to the top of the stairs. In the room about 10 sqm in size, a bright curtain hung in front of the bay window. Her bed had a yellow bedsheet with stuffed bears and pandas drawn on it, and in the back was a desk and a small bookshelf, it seemed to be a typical girlish room.

The young girl went to her desk, took her school homework from her bag, and started to work on it. I looked to see it was a math – no, it’s arithmetic for an elementary schooler, right? Seeing her serious expression made me feel like I was intruding, and I thought I should go somewhere – and then. A knock on the door and it opened up at almost the same time.

“Is it alright if I come in for a moment?”

The girl’s elder sister stood there. Holding some kind of paper bag in her hand, she held it out to the girl with a mischievous expression on her face. What came out of the bag was a small stuffed frog. It looked to be a keychain and apparently, she had had bought it for her younger sister somewhere.

The elder sister spoke to the young girl, who had a look of surprise in her eyes.

“You wanted this, so I bought it with the money I got from my part-time job today. How is it, are you happy?”

“……”

“Ah, could it be that you’re quite moved? Did your older sister live up to your expectations? You’re thinking that you really like it, or super love it?”

With her mouth half open, the young girl’s eyes merely twinkled, and she nodded in a panic, “Uwaa—So cute! You really are a good

younger sister!”

After hugging her tightly with both arms, the elder sister caressed the young girl’s black hair.

After gazing at the sisters, I looked again at the stuffed animal in the girl's hand. Looking at it carefully, it was a frog with a heavily anthropomorphized expression. However, when I looked at that goofy expression, a voice sounded inside my head, “This is it.”

--I see, couldn't I enter inside this stuffed animal?

No, entering, or possessing, at any rate, couldn't I assimilate with this frog somehow?

I hit upon the idea, and tried to squeeze myself into the frog in the young girl's hands. Even though it should have been impossible for a

large body of my size to fit into it, I was somehow able to do it. I don't know how to explain it, but it felt as if I had unexpectedly lost my hands and feet, and I was enveloped in an acrylic odor that made up the material of the stuffed toy. However, I completely transformed into the stuffed animal.

The young girl still had her mouth slightly open as she looked at me. And with her mouth slightly agape, she finally spoke in a hoarse tone of voice, "Thank you onee-chan."

"Sure. Take good care of it."

The elder sister winked as she said that, and left the room.

Having assimilated into the stuffed animal, I was left in the hand of the young girl. And, I was left exposed in front of the large eyes of the young girl. And, I realized why I had the idea of entering the stuffed doll. For a long, long time – to a heartrending degree, I wanted to be gazed through someone's eyes. No, rather than someone, I wanted to be reflected in this young girl's large eyes. I wanted her to fully accept my existence through her eyes, her perception.

"…Good afternoon."

The young girl eventually spoke in a whisper.

Feeling deeply moved, I too, replied with "Good afternoon". Of course, she couldn't have heard me. But the girl smiled, as if my voice had reached her. She then happily brought me up to her white, round and soft cheeks, and hugged me.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Frog – You are my friend."

○

The young girl said her name was M.

It was a proper Japanese name that began with M. However, it felt like it was a name that I shouldn't use as someone who was dead. I don't know why that was. It was an indescribable fear, as if calling her by her name would drag M to the world on my side. That's why, I decided to call her using the first letter of her name.

M took me (who was now a frog) with her whenever and wherever she went. She'd attach me to her bag when she went to elementary school, and when she returned home, she would take me off of her bag and place me neatly in a sitting position on the desk right in front of her.

M was quite a talkative girl. However, she always took her time before she spoke, so her timing was a little slow for the surrounding conversations. At any rate, in this quick-witted household, she stood out. She didn't seem to mind it, but from time to time, she would get impatient, and at times like that, M would talk straight to me in her room, telling me what she really wanted to say. That was a happy time for me as well. My words didn't reach M, but as if understanding the timing of my response, she spoke with me after taking pauses in between. She would talk to me about small troubles she would have at school, small complaints she couldn't make to her elder sister or her parents. And I, of course, gave her my advice. Naturally, my voice didn't reach her, but even so, I earnestly listened to her and supported her. In response, M would smile, as if she had calmed down a bit. She would sometimes say, "Thank you". At times like that, I was happy to stay as a stuffed frog for the rest of eternity.

M was presently in the first grade of elementary school, and had a good friend in class who had the name "Kii-chan". Kii-chan (whose real name I knew, but for the aforementioned reasons, will refer to her pet name) was a bright and cheerful child who took the initiative in leading the somewhat introverted M to places here and there. Her house seemed to be close-by, and she always came to M's house to take her to school with her.

For example, the day after I had turned into the stuffed frog.

"M-chan! Good afternoon!"

On that morning, I heard Kii-chan's lively voice, M's mother came to

the front door to greet her.

“Good morning, Kii-chan. Thank you for always. M will be down soon.”

They exchanged greetings, M asked her sister if she had forgotten anything, as she descended the stairs looking worried about various things. Of course, I as a frog, was securely fastened to the edge of her school bag as I swung back and forth.

“Good morning, Kii-chan--”

“Good morning, M-chan! …Ah, what’s that?”

With a sharp eye, Kii-chan noticed me and asked that.

“Onee-chan gave it to me as a present.”

“Woww—That’s great! It’s got a goofy face, but it sure is cute.”

“I haven’t named it yet, so, it’s Mr. Frog for now.”

“I see. Nice to meet you, Mr. Frog.”

--Nice to meet you too, Kii-chan.

After I finished greeting her, the two of them set out together as they walked towards their elementary school, and started talking about silly things along the way. About shows they watched last night on the television, or whether they had done their homework. Kii-chan was mostly leading the conversation, but when M would occasionally try to speak, Kii-chan would cease her machine gun-like talk for a moment, and lend an ear to M’s words until she finished speaking. As I saw that part of Kii-chan, I was convinced that this was the reason why M was so open to her.

“Did you know △△-Sensei is getting married soon?”

As the number of elementary school students with school bags increased on the path to school, Kii-chan changed the topic.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, I heard she’s getting married next spring, and I heard her boyfriend is really good-looking.”

“Is that so? That’s great.”

“She looks really happy these days--”

I listened to their carefree conversation, as I gazed at the town from the corner of the bag. The townscape that flowed with the slow pace of an elementary schooler was quite picturesque in its own way. Although I had seen this scenery countless times when I wandered alone, it was the first time since I died that I saw the power lines, the fences of old homes, and the thick, lush flowering dogwood that peeped out from them. The sky too was sunny and clear, the summer air was hot as expected, but it was also pleasant.

--Ah, I thought I stopped feeling anything for the scenery, the temperature, the blueness of the sky, but that wasn’t the case. Was it all the work of a relaxed mind? Does that mean that the heart can still be moved even after death?

I glanced at M happily trotting along, and I felt deeply grateful.

It was all thanks to meeting this girl. I was finally able to breathe easy since I started freeloading in this girl’s house. If I had stayed like that on the street in front of the station, I might have ended up mushed, dissolved and scattered away sooner or later. No, I might have ended up as the type that curses passersby without a reason, the one that becomes a rumored urban legend and ends up exorcised by some medium.

No, no, no. What was I thinking?

Aren’t things A-okay like this? No, that was completely wrong. I couldn’t stay in M’s house forever. I had to die properly, and go to Nirvana. But I was stumped as to how to do that up until now, not having a clue on how to achieve that.

“By the way.”

Around the time the elementary school became visible, Kii-chan suddenly spoke with a hushed voice as she turned to M.

“Did you know there’s a boy who likes you, M-chan?”

“…Eh?”

“Ehehehe—So you didn’t know after all?”

“E, eh, who is it?”

“Well, should I say it out loud? But I was told to keep it a secret.”

Kii-chan happily teased her, but M looked at Kii-chan’s face in all seriousness. Looking at her face, I was struck.

“Yeah, I won’t say it after all. Because I promised to keep it a secret.”

“…So mean.”

M spoke somewhat annoyed – but that’s what I wanted to say as well. To stop at that point was mean, Kii-chan. If I were in M’s place having heard that far, I’d be unable to take in any of the day’s classes in my head.

“Ahaha, sorry, sorry. But I guess sooner or later, he’ll say it to you directly. Because that’s what he said. So look forward to it!”

“…Eh, being told that suddenly is embarrassing.”

“It’s fine if it’s embarrassing. You were born a beautiful woman, M-chan, so it can't be helped, can it?”

She spoke somewhat teasingly, but Ki-chan’s smile was sunny, as if wishing her luck from the bottom of her heart. Kii-chan soon started running after that, and M also started running as if chasing her. The two burst into laughter, as they swayed their bags while running to the elementary school.

(--Ah, this is nice.)

It was nice to live, to be able to fall in love and so on.

As I thought that kind of thing, I was violently tossed up and down together with the flute in the bag and other things.

Finding it unbearable, I slipped out of the frog for a moment. When I stepped outside for the first time in a long time, I was instantly engulfed with the gooey sensation of torment of crawling around in mud I had felt recently.

--Oh no.

I hurriedly chased after M, and returned once again to the frog swaying on her bag. Therein, I took a deep sigh of relief as I calmed my heart once more. It was the inside of the stuffed frog I had found unbearable and jumped out of just a second ago, but it was far better than being outside.

And – at that moment, I realized.

Just by getting out of the frog made my heart heavy.

I was enveloped in a feeling of despair, as if I was adrift alone in the endless sea of night.

--I see, could it be that for a ghost, to possess something might be…

A feeling of finding a small piece of wood while drifting in the never-ending sea. What I felt just now was a very strong feeling of forlornness. A feeling of despair, as if just walking was enough to crush me with negative emotions. What it all comes down to is -- That humans, whether dead or alive, might be beings that can't stay alone.

○

A few days had passed by since then. Having not much else to do, my days were mostly spent observing the family.

For example, M's father was, to put it briefly, a person with a strong heart.

No, the feeling I got was that he strove to keep his heart extremely

balanced. When he came back from work, he was exhausted to an extent. However, the moment he opened the front door, he would always take a deep breath and smiled. He knew his smile would have a positive influence on his family. He seemed determined not to bring an ounce of the detestable things that ate away at him in the outside world back into his home. When I discovered that, I started to think what a cool guy he was. I felt the greatness of a person who was protecting something in the way he loosened his tie while his two daughters were clinging to him. Although he seemed to be a relatively accomplished businessman, he may not have been suited for such a job. Because on Sundays, he'd spend a large amount of time looking at magazines on model ships, and if there was an article on the sea in the newspaper, he would stare at it in a daze for who knows how long. It was a sad gaze, as if he had given up on something in the past, and yet at the same time, a gaze that suggested he still had something smoldering inside him somewhere. And despite that, when his daughters were in front of him, his face would return to being that of a father. The transition between the two was splendid, and I felt the strength in his graceful heart.

The mother was a truly cheerful person who loved jokes. She was the sociable sort, and her individual movements were energetic, as if she had done played sports for a long time. She was still a beauty, and I thought she might have been quite popular when she was younger. Her hobby seemed to be being a tennis mom, and she often organized meetings as the organizer. Was it because she worked at a friend's accounting office? She arranged all her tasks in an orderly fashion, but – was unexpectedly careless in her character, she would put an empty beer bottle in the fridge, and there were times when she would give Leo food twice in succession. From what I saw, she liked being busy, and had a lot going on in her head, which made it difficult for her to keep up with the different processes, causing mistakes to crop up here and there. However, she wasn't just a cheerful beauty. Her powers of observation were the keenest in the family – she was the most sensitive to changes in the physical and mental health of her family members. For example, when M was suffering from a headache in school, she returned home, back to her room and placed the bag there, and when she went downstairs to get some medicine, it would already be placed on the table. "How did you know?" M asked in amazement. "I'm your mother, after all." She would answer with a

smile like that of a sunflower. However, her unconscious intuition would be exhausting at times. When she would be alone, she would, at times, look depressed.

A(M's elder sister who I won't name due to the aforementioned reasons.) was a lively young girl in the first grade of high school. Since M was in her first year of elementary school, I calculated her to be 9 years older than M. She had played tennis since middle school and her grades were good, so she got into her current high school with a sports recommendation. She seemed to have been blessed with her mother's bright cheery nature and athletic ability, and was quite popular at school among both boys and girls thanks to her club activities. She inherited the quick wit from both her parents, and seemed frustrated at times by the comparatively slow response of those around her, but was mature enough not to show it. However, she was troubled at her own clever nature, and was jealous at times of the innocent reactions her friends showed. Once late at night, she was in tears after a friend told her, "That's why you got dumped." Well, I didn't pry too deeply into it… she was a girl of that age. She must be going through a lot.

The girl known as M who was surrounded by the three, was still only a first-year elementary school student, the purest of them all. She was the one closest to the dog Leo, and the one who diligently took care of the flowers in the garden. She was great at surmising the feelings of living things that couldn't speak. That might have been the influence of spending a lot of time at home alone, due to the family environment of working parents and an older sister being who was often away from home for club activities. She was a child, who, as an individual life form, was in contact with all kinds of animals and plants. Her having detected my existence at first, might have been because of that disposition of hers.

But to ask her to be too accommodating was still too much.

For example, when I went out of the frog, M would sometimes glance at me. For an instance, I would be glad, "Oh, did you notice me?" But she would make an uneasy face. At times like that, I would panic and do my best to erase my existence. If I were to put it concretely, I would wish, "I am a stone". That was the least considerate thing I could do in order to not break the peace I had now. I wanted M to

acknowledge my existence one day, but it felt like everything would be destroyed if I tried to rush things.

That's right – I was fine as "Mr. Frog" for now.

Just being by her side was good enough for me.

○

On that day, M had been asking me since morning, "Say, what do you think?"

Of course, since I was the frog, sat neatly on the desk:

(I think both of them are cute)

That was the answer I kept repeating.

For almost an hour, I had been made to go along with M's solo fashion show.

It was Sunday, and the family had planned for an outing in the afternoon. Her mother had told her, "Wear your best outfit," and M had been struggling with that up until now.

"This one… or another one for sure."

She said that as she threw off a white one-piece suit. However, among the six dresses she had changed into until now, it felt like that one suited her the best. I mean, It contrasted perfectly with her long black hair, well, it was little gaudy like a party dress, but to speak figuratively, it was cute like a princess in a foreign movie.

"I guess I'll go… with this one?"

In the end the dress M chose was the third one she had thrown away, a fully white blouse together with a navy-blue skirt.

(I mean, I just told you that one was cute too.)

“But I wore this to my school entrance ceremony.”

M still didn’t seem convinced. Did she want to say that it wasn’t cute enough? Ugh. I had no idea on how to advise her on this.

As I was thinking such things.

“Are you ready--? Everyone’s waiting, you know?”

With a cheerful voice, A entered M’s room. A looked completely ready, already wearing a three-quarter length white shirt and a knee-length skirt. Her chest was daringly open, A was quite glamorous, and changed completely to give a mature impression.

“Oh, you sure look cute!”

“Really…?”

“…Hm? Something seems off?”

A put her hands on her chin as and after a moment of contemplation, rummaged through M’s drawers of her own accord, and eventually took out a red choker.

“Stay still for a bit.”

Saying that, she gently placed it around M’s neck and lightly adjusted it.

“Now, how do you look?”

Together with A’s playful voice, what manifested was – A white blouse, a navy-blue skirt, and a red choker.

Guwaa--- So cute.

But the same time I thought that – Huh? Somehow, seeing her in an appearance that strangely suited her all too well, a fragment of a lost memory floated up to the surface.

A girl with a tie…and a white blouse.

Black hair…darkness…darkness without end…darkness.

--A darkness plastered over so heavily I couldn't even see my fingers.

And the facial features of that pale, well-ordered face that appeared in the darkness. Shining black---

A shivering cold instantly pierced through my entire body.

It was a face that appeared directly at the center of M's face, with eyes that were empty. Hungry eyes, that seemed to have lost something, and were hollow now.

"…Yes, I'll go with this one."

However, my absentmindedness was drowned out by M's voice, which sounded somewhat happy.

"Thanks, Onee-chan."

"That choker really suits you."

A nodded in satisfaction and picked up the small bag made of the same red leather, "Let's go, Papa and mama are waiting for us."

"What about Mr. Frog?"

"I, I'll take him with me…!"

"Okay--"

In a daze, I was picked up by A, and attached to the cord of the bag.

And before I had time to sort out what I had just seen, I was taken out of the room.

The town on Sunday was filled with the smiles of happy people. The sound of children's laughter. The sound of lovers laughing. The cheerful conversations exchanged among friends. It was filled with an exciting feeling that was enough to enliven even a dim and hazy existence like me.

"Well, A, M, let's go--"

Hearing their mother's voice, A and M, who had been clinging to a variety store window, took each other's hands and broke off into a run. Ahead of them was their father dressed in a navy-blue polo shirt and slacks, and their mother in a vivid one-piece dress, waving to them. A and M were smiling, and I, too, was excited, as if I became bound to the happy space of my surroundings. The strange scene that had crossed in my mind back in M's room had completely disappeared.

"Clothes come one at a time, you know. Take your time to choose."

The sisters obediently said, 'Yes', in response to their mother. Their eyes shone happily. Their father was already holding four bags and wore a slightly strained smile on his face.

"Are you fine with that?"

The mother suddenly asked the father that question.

"Fine with…?"

"You looked at it for a long time in the model shop just now, right? The model sailing ship."

"Ah…No, not really… I was just looking it over because of how well it had been made."

"It's alright if you buy it."

"Alright you say… but it was expensive."

"Well, I guess I'll get it for you as a present."

He froze with an "Eh", at those words.

"I just got my bonus, and the car inspection's not for a while, it's fine if it's once in a while."

"No, but…"

"It's fine, how much is it?"

“…It’s 150,000 yen.”

“…”

“…I said it was expensive, didn’t I?”

The mother groaned, “Ungh”, for a while at the father’s words.

I was shocked. That was expensive. It was expensive, but if it was that elaborate, it's probably a full-scale model for hobbyists.

“It’s alright, I’m sure I’ll be able to get it one day.”

When their father smiled, both of his daughters clasped one of his hands.

“Did you decide what clothes you wanted?”

Looking at him as he asked his daughters cheerfully – I thought to myself. It's not easy being a father. How many things did he give up on for the sake of his wife, his daughters, his family as a whole? How much had he put off doing what he wanted to do?

After that, I looked around at the families going up and down the road.

A young father giving a ride to his small boy on his shoulders.

A smiling father desperately trying to calm his wailing daughter with a smile while leading her by the hand.

An exhausted father who had fallen asleep on the bench holding a lot of baggage while his family was off shopping.

I wondered if all the fathers in this world more or less went through this sort of hardship?

After working late from Monday to Friday, they probably just want to rest during the weekend. They must be trying their best in the weekday with the goal of relaxing during the weekend. But on weekends, that time is all taken over by the family that impatiently waits for the father’s stay at home. Perhaps it was the same with my

father? Dammit, I still couldn't remember anything, but… I wondered if I died before my father even though he must have done so much for me. If that was the case, I felt, extremely remorseful. I couldn't even recall his face, but I was so ungrateful. As I hung my head down, M and the others who were unrelated to me moved ahead with smiles on their faces.

"I've decided. I want a new dress. For my club activities."

In response to A, her father replied.

"Is that alright?"

"It's quite expensive. A proper sportswear, that is. Be prepared."

"That is scary."

Her father smiled and looked in M's direction.

"What about you, M?"

"I…"

M hesitated as she put her arm over her father's hand. After the merciless demand from her sister, she seemed to waver in speaking her own wishes. But A helped her out, "This is the time to plead for what you've always wanted. It's alright, Papa got a bonus after all."

"A, you know it all too well."

"Yeah, It's because Mama is excited, after all."

"Eh—not at all, not at all."

"You are. You've been grinning while going through those accessory magazines these days."

"I was only looking at them because I thought they were beautiful."

Having lost the opportunity to talk as such conversations butted in, M's father secretly whispered in her ear.

"You're a kind child who puts up with things right away, but—it's

alright. I will buy anything for my daughters at any time. Although I don't usually buy you two things because I don't want you to think you can have everything in this world."

"…Is that so?"

"Yes, that's right. And don't worry, today is a special day besides birthdays and Christmas where you can say what you want."

"What… day is it today?"

M asked curiously, her father took a glance at her mother and sister arguing as always, and spoke in a whisper:

"…It's a secret, alright? Actually, today is the day papa and mama met."

"I, is that so?"

"Yes, though mama might have forgotten about it already."

Her father silently began to narrate the story:

"Papa was the head of the yacht club in his third year of university you see, and there was a monthly meeting of the club's heads. When papa went to that meeting, mama came as a representative from the tennis club. Even though she was just a freshman, she was forced to go to the meeting because the head of the tennis club found it troublesome. On that day, it was the preliminary budget meeting for the upcoming year. Papa's yacht club had a lot of expenses, and was on the verge of successfully negotiating a slight increase in the club's budget, when I suddenly faced fierce opposition from someone. From mama that is."

"…Uwaa."

"It quickly became a heated debate. And papa didn't know that mama was still only a freshman. It almost looked like a quarrel to the dismay of those around us. And you know because mama is clever, and very articulate, I was quickly put in an unfavorable position. Then – driven to the wall, papa said it: 『Do you have any idea how terrible the sea is? Do you know how fearsome it is? Say those things

after you've gone out to the sea at least once.』 Even now, I think that was immature of me… but, the sea isn't something to be looked down upon. Encountering a small storm at sea is enough to make you wonder whether or not you'll make it out alive, and the expression of the sea being scary at night isn't enough to underscore its unfathomable depths, and papa knew the danger of not having proper safety equipment for those circumstances."

"And how did mama react?"

"She looked bitterly disappointed. She looked like she was going to cry, and she kept glaring at papa."

"…….Ooh"

"But after that…"

Her father muttered with a look of nostalgia as if gazing somewhere far off.

"A few days after that, mama suddenly barged into the club room, saying she was going to join the club."

"Eh…?"

"She looked quite menacing – Ah, will you get the idea with menacing? She was very forceful; she had a certain air about her that neither papa nor his friends could say anything at all. Well, I let her in the club thinking she'd give up right away, and mama and papa then began club activities together, but... being sports oriented, she still attended the morning strength training sessions, and mostly without breaks, attended all activities. After about half a year, papa tried to ask her. Why did she quit the tennis club and join the yacht club? And--"

And, at that moment.

"Yes, that's far enough."

Her mother suddenly butted into their conversation.

Her face was flushed red with embarrassment. "I'm tired, let's take a

break! Let’s drink some tea!” She spoke in rapid succession as she walked ahead as if leading the way. M and her father exchanged smiles, and A smiled as she pushed them along.

The family settled down at a coffee shop located at the back of a department store.

The interior was adorned with an antiquated design, and about half of the plot had seating on the terrace. It was bustling with families and couples because it was the weekend, but M and her family managed to secure seats on one section of the terrace. There were six chairs around the round table, and I cunningly sat down on one of the seats. The family seemingly planned to relax there for a bit, go back shopping again, and in the end, go to a restaurant they had reserved beforehand in the evening.

At the table, topics unfolded in succession between A and her mother as always, as they laughed and giggled. The father let out a sigh of relief after finally being released from having to carry handfuls of luggage in both hands, M sipped some orange juice, while gazing at her family with a smile. I enjoyed the gentle quasi-sensation of becoming one of the family members.

Suddenly, a midsummer breeze blew across us.

In the clear sky, several cumulonimbus clouds appeared on the horizon.

--Ah, it's a beautiful day, isn't it?

The moment I thought that in a relaxed manner.

A part of the sky lit up as if torn apart. Even though there were no large clouds above me, clouds appeared as if they were gushing from a part of the sky, and from there, a single ray of light shone through.

(Ah…)

I slightly rose up, and my mouth dropped open involuntarily.

(That was – wasn't that the final call I couldn't catch last time…?)

I staggered up to my feet, and was about to move in its direction – when I took one look back in the direction of M's family.

I looked at them as if to burn the picture of the happily family in my memory, and whispered:

(Thank you.)

Thanks to you guys, I finished things without becoming a spirit who curses the world without distinction. Thanks to the warm atmosphere you created, I feel I can go to nirvana. For the last time, I gazed once more at the young girl sitting deep back in her chair smiling and waving her legs back and forth. I closed my eyes partly as if caressing M's beautiful face with my fingers.

(--You look happy. But you should be happier. Smiling really suits you after a--)

However, the moment I whispered that.

I felt someone's scream roar inside my head.

At the same time, I was on the verge of remembering something very important – and I suddenly realized.

It was the strange feeling I had once felt.

What was that? I couldn't recall at once, but – eventually, I realized it was someone's gaze.

Right now, someone was observing me. In short, in this coffee shop, or in the streets in front of me, or in the building, there was someone who could see me.

I raised my head, and hurriedly looked around. It being a Sunday

afternoon, there were a lot of passersby. However, no matter how much I looked, I couldn't find the person who could see me among them. I tried to look up at the surrounding buildings, but there was no one at the windows, nor on the rooftops.

(…Was it just my imagination?)

No, something like that doesn't matter anymore.

I couldn't miss my chance for that final call this time. Now was the time for me to properly depart to the other world.

With that in mind, I slowly walk towards the light that poured down.

Yet, the gaze pierced me again. And for some reason, I felt a chill. There was a familiarity that said, I'm tired of seeing beings like you, and if anything, there was a nasty feeling lingering in the air.

(--W… Who's there?)

I looked around once more, and this time, carefully checked each individual customer.

Then, my eyes were drawn to the customer sitting at the furthest end of the terrace.

A somewhat mature looking young girl sat there. Her black hair was around shoulder-length. She had a tomboyish beauty. She wore a gothic style black dress like that of a medieval aristocrat, and her long legs crossed. A black umbrella was propped up on the table, and her fingertips were playing with the hairs around her ears.

She seemed to be absentmindedly staring off somewhere, when she suddenly looked at me.

Then, she grinned. Her cold smile made me horrified.

(--Who, are you?)

The moment I whispered that, a lost memory cried out inside me. No… I knew. I had a feeling as if I knew her. Just by being close to her presence was enough to make me feel helplessly scared, and I

certainly knew it once.

“Aren’t you going?”

Hearing that voice – I froze in place.

There was a considerable distance between me and her seat. And yet, her voice was no more than a whisper. That voice, clearly reached me right now.

“Why are you looking like a frog that suddenly lost its legs? If you keep dawdling like that, the light will disappear again.”

She chuckled and continued.

Those words, too, reached me clearly. But the creepy thing was – that this time, her lips hadn’t moved at all. Her well-shaped lips kept a soft smile.

(--Who are you? Can you see me?)

I tried to ask that question. However, those words were inside my mind. It was impossible for me to physically shake the air. That was supposed to be the case – but my words definitely seemed to reach her. The girl in the black dress distorted her white face and smiled once more, a smile that spelled coldness.

“Of course, I can see you. And I know who you are.”

Before I’d realized, I had begun to stagger ahead.

As if being dragged by an invisible chain, I moved towards the girl.

The girl in the black dress continued to gaze at me, and as she gently stroked the cup of tea with her long fingers, she whispered:

“Say, how does it feel to be dead? Have you had a little taste of what it feels like to be a ghost, the thing you were so scared of?”

(Who the hell are you?)

I asked, as I stood beside her as if looking down on her. However, the

girl ignored everything and looked up at the sky.

“Ahh—It disappeared. Even though it was your final call. Even though it might have returned you to the world where you belonged.”

With that, she sat back deeper in her chair. And squinted her eyes behind me – At M and her family who were happily talking to each other.

“Aren’t they such a nice family? They look so happy. It’s exactly the thing families in this world are jealous of: a warm and blessed household.”

I looked back in response to her words and looked at M and her family.

--Ah, I know that.

Even if you didn’t tell me, I know that all too well. I was in eternal solitude, unable to intervene in anything, or be seen by anyone. I was rotting away in a world where time moved at a snail’s pace. That family provided me tranquility for a brief period.

“Even if you didn’t tell me, you say? No, I know a little more about that family than you.”

The young girl declared as she wore a sarcastic smile.

“For example, the father is a graduate of a top institute, and is a capable trading employee at a foreign enterprise. He and her mother began dating when they were both in university, and although they broke up once, they reunited and married after they both entered the workforce. The daughter was born the following year, and after working overseas for seven years, he returned to Japan and was soon blessed with a second daughter. As the breadwinner of the family, the father succeeded in acquiring a house in Tokyo in his forties, and judging from the fact that he is still frequently headhunted by other companies, it is safe to say that his future is promising. His first and second daughters are both beautiful, and even their dog is pedigreed. It's the kind of picture-perfect family that everyone dreams of –

however, despite all that.”

The girl in black, lowered her voice teasingly.

“Things don’t always work out so well in the world, do they?”

With those words, I turned away from M and the others, and looked back. I glared at the pale young girl who had at some point unfolded a black parasol and was twirling it on her shoulders.

…What is it? What are you trying to say?

“I don’t really have a nice personality, so let me spoil it for you right at the beginning. That family won’t make it to August happy as they are.”

“Around two weeks from now – On the 31st of July, they will all die.”

◯

T-they will all die…?

(What the hell do you mean?)

I shouted out loud, but my words were so fleeting they were scattered by the wind. I'm not even sure if they spilled over into the real world. But it seemed this girl could hear everything I say.

"I don't like being on the ground. Let's go somewhere we can look down on the world."

The girl in black stood up and held out her white hand like the belly of a dead fish.

And once more, she sneered. Her lips twisted like that of a red pomegranate.

"If a lady holds her hand out, it's considered polite to respectfully support it from below, isn't it?"

As if enticed by those words, I reached my hand out, and at that moment—

--*Whooosh* A raging wind blew through.

I unintentionally covered my face. The raging wind smacked me from all four directions, and before I'd realized, my body, which originally felt no weight, was lifted off the ground. I couldn't open my eyes. It wasn't so much the strength of the wind as it was fear. An absolute fear that pierced through my sensory organs, which had become so devoid of emotion. Together with a sense of despair of not being able to resist no matter what I did -- Why was it? A different emotion overflowing inside me painted over that.

Once….before… I had been in the midst of this sensation...repeatedly. The feeling of going against the warning voice in my head telling me to stop, and stepping foot into the depths of darkness. With my eyes shut tight, and being enveloped in a sense of anxiety as my knees shook – In that world that made my lower stomach twist and turn, I grabbed the hand of the girl dressed in black. The feeling was also somewhat nostalgic. Ah, that's right. When I was in the midst of fear, I always clasped someone's hand. There was someone always next to me, someone who I could never trust, and yet, someone more trustworthy than anyone else in the world. However, that person's hand didn't have the dreadfulness of this young girl dressed in black. She was cold, like a corpse, but peeling beyond the dozens of layers of despair, it felt like there was endless warm blood.

"We're here!"

A clear voice like that of a young boy echoed—

When I opened my eyes, I found myself on top of a tall building.

It must have been one of the commercial buildings in front of the station. I looked around and I could see the café I had just been in below me. You couldn't tell unless you strained your eyes, but M and

the others were still there. The four of them were laughing and drinking tea together. Confirming the situation from the handrail, I let out a deep breath.

--*Clang* A sound rang out next to me—

I looked to see the girl holding a black laced parasol softly leap on top of the handrail. Her appearance with only one arm outstretched as she kept her balance looked innocent enough for her age.

“Ah, how nostalgic. I was playing around like this back then as well.”

…?

“You did it as well, didn’t you? You must have jumped off from there the same way I did.”

--What are you talking about?

As I stood there in a daze, unable to answer.

“…Hmm.”

She made a somewhat curious expression, and stood still.

“Oh, I see. It seems you are in an extremely unique condition. In the highest order and the lowest order – on the surface and underneath. You seem to have absolutely no memories whatsoever.”

…The highest order, lowest order? What are you on about? I have no clue at all what you’re talking about, but—Ah, you’re absolutely right. I have nothing. No body, no name, no memories… and even my emotions have diminished. Do you know who I am? What’s going to happen to me from now on? Why am I lost alone in the world like this despite being dead, and how can I end it all?

The young girl nodded once in response to my rapid questions.

“First, let me introduce myself.”

Then, while standing on top of the handrail, she curtsied by grabbing both edges of her skirt and raising them slightly.

“My name is Takamura.”

…Takamura?

“Written with the kanji of bamboo on top of the kanji for divine(篁) – well, I suppose those symbols mean nothing. I was merely called that when I was alive, it has no particular meaning to me right now.”

She muttered, sounding somewhat bored, thereupon she merely gazed at me.

“As for your name – let’s now say it out loud for now. If called by that name, you might end up taking form. For you people, the ‘name’ is what ties the target to the place, and if we do that, then all the trouble of peeping into this time period will all be for naught.”

…Hey, stop screwing with me. If making me remember my name is what gets me out of this situation, then hurry up and say it. Why are you tormenting me like this?

“Why? For what reason, you ask?”

In response, the young girl who went by the name of Takamura contorted her red mouth into a smile.

“Because it’s fun, after all.”

……..

“Isn’t it far, far more entertaining that way? Is there any other necessity for people to do something in this world?”

…This person was dangerous somehow.

Her way of thinking was fundamentally different from my own. It felt like the basis of the place she stood on was out of sync with the world of the living itself.

The cold thought made me unconsciously take a step back, when I suddenly realized.

--Huh? Did she say something about taking a peep just now?

“That’s right – Spiritual things sometimes transcend time and space, Mr. Nobody. Right now, you from the future are looking at the world ten years in the past.”

--Ten years in the past you say?

But with those words, I heard a sound like a block of ice melting in my head.

…Ah…was that it… was that what it was? The sense of unease I felt from the size of the television and the content of the news. The reason why I seemed to know all the information being broadcast on television. It wasn’t because the world was behind the times…. it was me who was present in the past?

“I’ll explain it for you, so do keep up.”

Before I’d realized, a shiny tea cup had appeared in the hands of the girl known as Takamura.

After taking a sip, she spoke:

“There is a chance that you might not be dead yet.”

…W, what did you say?

“I believe your brain is in a state where it judged – or rather, mistook you for dead. Well, if you were to return to your original world, you might truly end up dead. Whatever it is, it’s because you had once experienced this in the past. It became easier for you to connect with this place. And thanks to that, you were able to have a chance encounter with me.”

After smiling nostalgically, she made a silly face.

“I’ll say it once more – spiritual things sometimes transcend space and time, Mr. Nobody.”

With those words, it felt as if the earth suddenly shook. A warning sound blared inside me, telling me I shouldn’t listen to this girl any longer.

“In the first place, the human ego is merely the accumulation of weak signals inside the brain. And although invisible, there are countless signals constantly raining down on us in this world. From outer space, from natural materials, from electrical appliances – that’s how it’s filled with countless signals, and the humans with brains who can receive those signals are called ‘Denpa-san’[4] as the name implies, but that term is always used as mockery, right? No, to me, these humans are the species that have reached the next stage. In all likelihood, you will go through a life and death struggle ten years from now. And even though your body might still be alive, in the event that your mind receives the false information that you’ve died, people experience a phenomenon known as an out-of-body experience. There’s a way to consciously reach that point as well, but I wouldn’t recommend it. Because after all, what the mind believes becomes the entire reality of this world. However, humans have the useful mental condition of misunderstanding. In short, your main body is in the state of misunderstanding itself as dead. And your ego, the weak signals that have separated from your body – are, right now, accessing the information you wish to know most of all. That is to say, the vast data aggregate that sits at the center of the universe.”

--What’s that?

“They’re what’s commonly called the Akashic Records, but well, it doesn’t matter what they’re called. To put it simply, a single, minute part of the countless records of creation and destruction that have been etched into the record since the creation of the universe – you are accessing the data in the third planet from the sun, in far east Asia, Tokyo, July 2001, that revolves around a certain family.”

…No.

No, I understand the theory. But it’s unthinkable. It’s too absurd.

“If that’s the case Mr. Nobody, let me put it another way. The internet has rapidly become widespread in the past few years, correct?”

Takamura abruptly changed the topic at hand. With the long fingers of her right hand, she gestured as if operating an invisible keyboard.

“And it will probably evolve – nay, deepen, from here on. The moment I understood the gist of that technology, I thought to myself: Ah, humanity is headed further inwards.”

At that moment, a strange voice echoed inside my head.

“From here on, where is the human species heading?”

“Space? Another dimension? I think neither.”

“From now on, humanity is headed towards a more inner world.”

The words I had once heard somewhere some time ago, silently repeated inside my head. They continued to echo ominously inside my head, as if they were some kind of rhyming Kotodama.

“I can't help but feel that there is a strong similarity between the Internet and the spiritual world. I believe the protocols of the spirit world and the internet are very similar. The man known as computing’s Johnny Appleseed, the father of internet, J.C.R Licklider was also a psychologist. You are now accessing a vast amount of known information through the use of dark matter, which is known to exist but not confirmed. In short, all of what you are witnessing is past. Everything has ended. That’s why, no matter what brutal event befalls that family, there’s no need to be sad even if there’s a need to feel pity. There's nothing you can do about it; Everything has already ended from the point of your original timeline.”

--T, that was it.

What do you mean when you say that everyone in the family will die?

In response, Takamura raised her parasol, and spoke while skillfully maintaining her balance.

“That was a very, very strange incident – Publicly, it was known as the ‘The Mansion Hanging Massacre Case’. Even though ten years have passed since then, the real culprit is yet to be found, An

inexplicable family massacre that shocked the world of the Heisei era.[5] Someone broke into a peaceful family from somewhere, killed the whole family including a small dog, and suddenly disappeared altogether. People in the world have no way of ascertaining the truth of what really happened, and even those with a little knowledge of the situation may only be aware that *a graduate student appeared out of nowhere and settled the case like a great detective in the classics.* However, the real truth was different, completely different."

Under the blue sky, the young girl dressed in black sneered.

"The real culprit is still boldly strutting somewhere in your original world ten years from now."

"In the first place, this is not an incident people should concern themselves with. Despite that, you will witness the entirety of the horror that happened to that family back then from here on. Along the way, you will despair of everything. And as a result, the last remaining vestiges of your individuality might be obliterated. Well, that can't be helped."

Why? Why would I--?

"Because you wished it, of course. I believe it's your perverse disposition, but well, that's what human curiosity's all about. It's not something to be critical of in others. Even if you were able to retain your self-consciousness until the end, you wouldn't be able to bring those memories back with you when you returned to your world, as they will amount to nothing more than weak signals. Because the amount of information would be overwhelming, far beyond your capacity."

--If that's the case, then.

If what this girl called Takamura was saying was the truth, then I would be someone on the verge of death ten years from now, and if I

was nothing more than weak signals peeping back into the past – then going through the anguish of acquiring that information, and not being able to take it back, that would mean that all my actions would be meaningless, wouldn't it?

No, Takamura shook her head at that point.

"That's not necessarily what I'm saying."

She smoothly changed her posture, and sat down on the handrail of the building. She crossed her legs on the other side of the building, spun around the parasol on her left shoulder, pointed down at the expanding world below, and spoke:

"Say—take a look at those people down there. Those mere specks are living their own lives with their own distinct individualities, don't you think it's strange for them to have their own distinct troubles? Whether they kill themselves, get killed, or live out their natural lives, death is just death. Ever since the universe was born 13.6 billion years ago, its essence hasn't changed. Even though they live their lives crawling through worries and suffering that are actually mere trifles when seen through the eyes of another, they can't even look down upon themselves and laugh. Be that as it may, you all who are nothing more than mere microbes when seen from space, have a soul that trembles when shaken. Something engraved on your soul that suffers through everything, might knock down this hopeless reality, even if only a little."

The young girl kept a cold gaze at my face as she smiled, and quickly reached out with her white hand. And it literally stretched right up to my eyes, which were a few meters away from Takamura.

"Don't disappoint me now."

Her long, slender fingertips grabbed my hair in a single jerk. I was unable to resist, as if the thought of putting up any resistance whatsoever was stolen from me, my face was pulled right before the eyes of the girl in black.

"Two weeks from now. Just what will you scoop out when you see a certain family's last moments, the hidden truth with your own eyes.

I’m very interested.”

“Struggle, writhe, and thereafter, fight back – Show me a fightback so magnificent that I fall in love with you.”

Case 00 – Chapter 2: A World of Ash

Let’s say you were to try and divide all possible life events into happiness and unhappiness.

If so, the ratio generally comes out to be 50/50, which means that in short, how one perceives happiness as happiness is proportional to our experience of unhappiness as unhappiness – is what I felt someone once told me. The details are fuzzy to me since I don’t have any memories, but at any rate, it seems that people who are always "happy" do not feel "happy” based on the premise of their current state. It may be that "happiness" is perceived as "happiness" only when there is something to compare it to. That’s why unhappiness might be a critical spice for life is what that someone might have been trying to say, but—no, wait a minute. I would like to say it out loud right now. Even if that was the case, isn’t my condition right now a bit too high on the side of “unhappiness”?

First of all, I had no reason to live. I mean, being dead to begin with means any reasons go to hell, but in any case, I don’t feel like I’m moving forward at all. I was unable to decay physically, only an eternity of endless thoughts continued, and even in those negative mass of thoughts, I can only think, “I want to die properly as soon as possible”. I never thought it would be this painful to not be seen or cared about by anyone. When I wandered alone in town, my thoughts and emotions were headed to an endless oblivion because of the extreme bitterness, but I was saved thanks to meeting the young girl known as M. No, I don’t know if it would be right to say that I’ve been saved completely, but at any rate, my condition now was a little better than rotting away in the city as I was back then. That’s the extent of my “happiness”.

However—

That girl in the black dress said it.

『Around two weeks from now – On the 31st of July, they will all die.』

After that, I checked the calendar. The 31st of July 2001, was, by chance, an unlucky date. What in the world was going to happen to the family on that day? Just who the hell was that Takamura girl to begin with? What was she trying to make me do by telling me, me who was already dead? She was able to see me and have a conversation with me; She seemed to know me back when I was alive. And on top of all that, she had a sense of biological superiority, as if looking down on everything. Recalling Takamura's pale, tomboyish beauty, I trembled with fear. She was, how should I put it… dangerous. Undeniably dangerous. I understood that much. Even I, who had little emotion, couldn't stop feeling goosebumps, her whole body was covered with a stagnant cold air.

Could it be that she was the "God of death" incarnate? Or perhaps a demon? Or an Anunnaki, interdimensional aliens described on Sumerian clay tablets? Ah, those might have all been the same thing – is what I felt the easygoing me thought back when I was still alive, however, because she had a supernatural aura about her, I didn't feel like there was any hint of a lie in her words, which was troubling. Perhaps her awakened gaze that seemed to regard 'death' as a trivial matter led me to believe so.

『Don't you think it's really inefficient to live in human form?』

Takamura spoke as if looking down on the world from the top of the building afterwards.

I don't know. I had no idea. I didn't have the answer to such a difficult question even after death. Why do people live, and why are they so afraid of death? Where did the emotion known as 'fear' come from in the first place? I had no clue about that at all right now – and when I reached that thought, something suddenly came to me.

『Hey, are you scared?』

『How does it feel to be scared?』

I don't know if that was from my own memories, or someone's scattered memories from that Akashic something. At any rate, that vague someone stood beyond the darkness. She turned her pale face toward me and asked me in a voice that sounded like a bell. In my jumbled memories, I tried my best to concoct an answer, trying to convey the true face of fear. I was infatuated with her even while fearing her, and I became unable to leave her alone. Before I'd realized, she had become a very familiar existence.

Ah, what is this scene? What did she say her name was?

--It's no use. I can't remember. Everything was vague, as if covered by a fog. Is this what you called lingering attachments? Was I clinging to life once more? I had completely begun to accept myself as a ghost, but thanks to the girl in the black dress, I felt so frustrated at my lack of memory.

That's right, in the end – there was no 'hope'.

There was too little hope from here on out. I was troubled to stay near M for forever like this, and after being forewarned of the 'The Noose Mansion Massacre Case' that would happen two weeks from now, there was just too little "happiness" in my life.

I vacantly thought on such things—

As I lay alone on the roof of M's elementary school.

I had already spent two days in idleness since I met that girl dressed in black.

The sun was already shining brightly, and clouds rolled high above

across the sky; today would be another beautiful day.

As things stood, the fun summer vacation would soon arrive, then the delicious food of fall, the jam-packed winter full of events, and then spring when the vegetation would sprout all at once— It was so sunny that I could only think of such natural happiness coming and going.

M and the others were the same as always. They were in the flow of a peaceful time as they peacefully passed their days in tranquility. It was hard to believe they were a family that had been marked by a Death God.

The father came home right after finishing his work, the mother would cheerfully tell jokes, and the elder sister was busy with her club activities, and M being M was content with her life, smiling alone in the corner. That was surely because of the exquisite feeling of balance that both her parents brought about. It felt like the two of them didn't just care about a single family member, but acted conscious of the whole family in mind. That was surely what created the warm and inviting household, and made me wish it would stay that way forever.

Irritated, I scratched my hair, and looked up at the sky.

At any rate, this was about the limit of what I could do right now. My thinking was dull, painful, and I couldn't construct things logically. I came here because when inside Mr. Frog, my consciousness was taken up by what was in front of my eyes, which was a problem, but even here — my ability to think didn't really change. In any case, if what that death god-like, or alien-like young girl said was true, I had to do something to save that family. And that, I felt, was the reason why I had wandered ten years into the past.

There was no sign of that light pouring down from the heavens in the blue sky that appeared again that time. It was perfectly clear as far as the eye could see. I'm sure it must have ended up going somewhere again.

And I felt that it would never appear again.

○

In the end, no bright ideas came to mind, and the merciless passage of time continued.

And then, I learned of that strange incident on the day of M's schools' end-of-term ceremony.

"Say, M-chan. Do you know about the incident that happened in the neighboring town?"

Tomorrow being the start of summer vacation, the students were making a big ruckus since the homeroom teacher had yet to arrive in the classroom, but M was sitting alone in her seat, when Kii-chan spoke to her.

"Mom didn't really tell me much about it, but something scary happened."

"Something scary?"

M cocked her head slightly, and Kii-chan replied in a hushed tone.

"That's right, something really scary. I don't know what it was. But mom was really scared."

M's face darkened at hearing those words, and I too, who was inside Mr. Frog affixed to her bag, felt like I had swallowed iron. Well, in my case, it was because I was anxious not knowing what to do despite the two-week deadline drawing to a close that the girl who called herself Takamura told me.

"I heard a *Tengu* appeared."

Thereupon, S-chan, a girl who was on good terms with both M and Kii-chan butted into the conversation, saying something outrageous.

"My father told me. Someone was murdered by a Tengu."

“Eh--? Being murdered means they died, right? That’s scary.” Kii-chan spoke.

But when S-chan saw M suddenly look unwell with her head cast down, S-chan hurriedly put on a cheerful face.

“Ah. But it’s going to be alright! Papa said the police are looking into it, and they'll catch the Tengu or whatever it is soon!”

“…Yeah.”

M finally opened her well-shaped eyebrows when she heard that.

I managed to take a look at the entire classroom from within the frog.

With summer vacation starting tomorrow in mind, most of the first-year elementary school students were brimming with excitement. Summer festivals, the Bon Festival dances, swimming pools, the beach, and playing in the mountains. The watermelons would be delicious, and some of them would probably play with their grandparents and cousins who they rarely met. However, looking closer, there were faces of elementary schoolers talking with serious faces here and there, and it seemed a number of kids already knew of the so-called ‘Tengu incident’. For the time being, I drew closer to those guys and tried to gather up all the gossip – but I still didn’t get a complete picture.

“I mean, even the lowest branch of the ginkgo tree at that shrine is around four meters, right?”

Suddenly, a lively boy in the back of the class, who seemed to be the leader of a group of kids, raised his voice somewhat excitedly.

“It would have had to be a big guy to have an old guy hanging upside down there.”

“But if it was four meters long, then even a bug guy couldn’t have…”

- Whack*

The boy who objected to his argument was smacked on the head by the leader.

“You idiot, that’s why it must have been a Tengu.”

“Where did you hear that from?”

“An uncle from the neighborhood association who always brings me rhinoceros beetles. That’s why it’s not a lie.”

I didn’t understand it well, but it seemed that an old man from the shrine had died. And moreover, in unusual circumstances.

However, the great commotion that started with the ‘Tengu theory’ ultimately jumped to the boys in the class talking about forming a ‘Tengu subjugation squad’.

…Somehow.

This sure felt nostalgic, I thought to myself. It felt like the world of children was largely decided by the opinions of influential guys with clout. Though I didn't know for sure since I had no memories.

“The boys are full of energy, aren’t they?”

Kii-chan laughed exasperatedly at their behavior.

“But why would a Tengu do a thing like that?”

“Maybe because it might have wanted to eat him later. You know, Sensei told us there was a bird who did the same thing.”

“S-chan, you mean, the murdered old man was impaled on the branches?”

As Kii-chan and S-chan returned to that kind of inappropriate conversation, M suddenly opened her mouth, “Hey, aren’t you scared?”

“…Eh?”

“Don’t you think it’s scary to talk about such things?”

Both Kii-chan and S-chan faltered in response to M's straight-faced questioning.

“It is scary. It’s scary, but how should I explain it? It’s strange, but it’s a little exciting as well.”

Kii-chan eventually answered, and M cocked her head in puzzlement.

“Umm… I know I'm not supposed to say it like that, but, well, there were a lot of TV people there, and a lot of police cars driving around, it was different from usual, it was like a festival.”

…Ahh. That was called – ummm, a spring day. One of the worldviews unique to the Japanese, The usual days were separated as ‘Ke(Ordinary)’, and the unusual as ‘Hare(Spring)’ from what I can remember. And somebody explained that the concept of ‘defilement (Kegare)’ came to be mixed in there afterwards[6]…

Wait a minute, how do I know that story? Was I a student majoring in folklore studies or something back when I was alive? However, it felt like I wasn’t especially knowledgeable about it, so it might have just been second-hand information from that certain someone.

“Well, since someone got killed, it really is different from a festival. But, even though it’s scary, it’s… how should I say, it ends up feeling festive. Maybe it’s because the person who was killed was someone I didn’t know.”

“……..”

“How was he killed? Was he hung by the neck? Was he stabbed with something sharp? Both of those seem like they would hurt.”

M took one look back with a sad expression in response, “Let’s just stop. Kii-chan,” and broke off the conversation.

“Why?”

“Somehow – I don’t think it’s right to talk about the dead.”

While inside the stuffed frog, I too, couldn't help but look behind me. It somehow felt like the murdered victim ended up drawing closer. M probably felt the same thing.

When, thereupon—

“Hello. Good morning everyone--!”

The plump middle-aged and gentle-looking female homeroom teacher entered the classroom and called out to her students, causing all the first-year students to hurriedly rush back to their seats. They stood up, a cute sounding chorus of “Good morning!” rang out, and after they finished their mannered greeting:

“A sad incident happened in the neighboring town yesterday.”

The homeroom teacher began to narrate with a solemn expression on her face.

“But the adults are doing their best. The police are very good at their job. They’ll definitely catch the bad guys soon, so let's all study hard as usual.”

In response, Ye—sss, the first graders, who were still very obedient, replied loudly all at once.

“Today is the end of the first semester, but a word of warning. During summer vacation, don’t play with your friends in any secluded areas away from people. Always go with an adult wherever you go. Moreover, I believe there will be TV people in town. They’ll be the ones with microphones and cameras. If they ask you something, tell them you don’t know anything. If we talk too much, then the adults might be late in solving the case. Answer them properly with politeness. Can you all do that?”

Another loud ‘Yeees’ rang out in the classroom once more.

“You’re all such nice children. Then, sorry to keep you waiting, I’ll be handing out all your report cards!”

The classroom immediately erupted in an uproar, but the teacher roared, ‘Be quiet’, and began to hand out the report cards in turn. Talk of the ‘Tengu Incident’ as well the ‘Subjugation Squad’ was instantly forgotten in the commotion.

Children quickly change their interests from one moment to the next, however, I couldn’t afford that luxury. Before homeroom finished, I gently slipped out of the stuffed frog affixed to M’s bag, and went to

the staff room.

The staff room was situated on the same floor as M's classroom. I slipped through the door, and sure enough, the teachers were talking to each other about the incident. Thereupon, after gathering bits and pieces of information from walking here and there, this was the general feeling I got:

The man who died was said to be in his fifties known as Mr. Niizawa from S-town. Just how the leader of the group from M's class had described, his body was discovered hanging from a two-hundred-year-old ginkgo tree on the grounds of an Inari shrine. However, it seemed he wasn't hanging upside down, but simply hung by his neck. The reason why this case had not been highlighted by the public was that it was treated as an ordinary suicide -- however, the people in the locality seemed to treat it a mysterious death. The reason being that the branch Mr. Niizawa hung from was about four meters above the ground, and the trunk of that large ginkgo tree was thick enough that even a trained person would have had great difficulty climbing it. There was no ladder nearby, and there was no knowledge of Niizawa-san being good at climbing trees, so they were creeped out, wondering how he climbed all the way up with a noose in hand, and that If he was going to kill himself, weren't their easier ways to do so?

--I see, so that's why they're calling it the work of a Tengu.

I somewhat understood, but it was no doubt a creepy incident.

However, two days into summer vacation, it happened.

The next strange incident happened. That morning, something felt different from usual, and my consciousness, which had dozed off in the frog, was suddenly awakened.

The hot sunshine was already pouring in from behind the window curtains, but the clock on the wall showed that it was only 7:00 in

the morning. In her room, M was sleeping peacefully in her bed, with the air conditioner set to low, and the temperature remained constant. However, I could hear the somewhat tense voices of the adults ringing out from downstairs. I slipped out of the frog, then through the doors, and descended the stairs.

There were two strangers at the front door with a grave expression on their faces deep in conversation with M's parents.

"…Anyway, let's keep the doors locked tight. And if there are any strangers around, let's communicate with the rest of the neighborhood association right away. It might be better to keep kids inside for the time being."

"But why Nagami-san…?"

"We don't know. The patrol car is on its way here now, and many more will be here soon. One of the policemen told me that it was a murder case."

"Um, does it have something to do with the incident in the neighboring town the other day? The random attacker or something?"

"The police will be looking into that as well. However, the fact that we don't know what happened at all after that incident is troubling."

It seemed the two people talking to M's parents were from the neighborhood, and judging from the nature of their conversation, it seemed that "An incident similar to the one three days ago in the neighboring town had occurred very close by." Which meant that the 'scary incident' the first-year elementary school kids were making a fuss about had occurred once more. And I couldn't help but feel that these two scary incidents were the beginning of 'something'.

Ten days from now, M's family would be attacked in a mysterious incident that would remain unsolved ten years in the future. I was assailed with an inescapable sense of dread as if it was finally happening.

Unable to sit still, I passed through the four of them and went

outside. Under the blistering sun that was sure to get even hotter from now on, I searched for the house of that ‘Nagami-san’. However, before I even thought of ‘searching’, I could see that the town was in an uproar after just a short walk. A dozen or so meters ahead of me, a single patrol car stood parked silently with only its red-light blinking, and next to it was a normal passenger car that seemed to have been an unmarked police car. Even though it was still early in the morning, there were countless onlookers swarming the surroundings, taking photos of the uniformed police officers at the entrance with their cell phones in one hand. The house at the center of all this commotion probably belonged to the so-called ‘Nagami-san’.

I slipped past the crowds of onlookers and entered the house. Yellow tape had already been plastered in front of the entrance, and the interior was hectic with several uniformed police officers going up and down the stairs. The incident seemed to have occurred upstairs. I continued to slip through the officers and stepped onto the stairs.

On the second floor, there was a middle-aged guy who looked like a plain clothes detective. He was dressed in a creased navy-blue suit, his stiff hair was streaked with gray, and he had a bitter expression on his face, as if he had just eaten an astringent persimmon. I peeked into the room the old guy was looking at. And, standing next to the old guy, I ended up making a face like him.

In the Japanese style room about 10 sqm in size, the man probably known as ‘Nagami-san’ lay collapsed.

I wondered what kind of person he was, but even after looking at him, I had no idea. Because his head was cleanly missing from the neck up. He had a knife gripped with both hands, and was covered in a pool of his own blood, well it’s obvious to say, but he was dead. Judging from the condition of the corpse, it was as if he had died by chopping his own head off. But – was such a thing even possible? At the center of the neck there was the bone after all, and midway through there would be massive blood loss leading to a loss of consciousness, that would surely make it impossible. I looked around the tatami-mat room, but the head was nowhere to be found. And that's when I suddenly realized.

--Ah, so that's why it was being called a 'murder case'.

Did that mean that there was someone who took only the head out of the house.

Perhaps it was because my emotions did not really undulate, but even seeing a dead body in front of my eyes did not upset me. Still a bitterness rose up from the bottom of my stomach. Perhaps a feeling of resignation at an extremely common occurrence, of the taboo of the human world since time immemorial, of "man killing his fellow man."

"Oi, the forensics still haven't arrived?"

One of the uniformed police officers replied with a frown in response to the old man's inquiry.

"Tatsuke-san, aren't you out of your jurisdiction?"

"Isn't it alright? Just let me take a little look."

A faint smile appeared unconcealed on one of the officers who was looking at the old man.

It seemed this old man was a police officer, but seemed to be a little frivolous in nature.

"Oh dear, this tatami has become quite useless now, hasn't it?"

The moment the plain clothes officer called Tatsuke muttered that…

《We found the head!》

The report simultaneously came in through the radios of the cops present.

"Where is it?"

《It's in the garden. On the branch of a persimmon tree in the garden--》

"A tree in the garden?"

I stuck close to the galloping old man as he ran out the room. We both jumped down the stairs, exited the front door into the garden and looked around. There were two police officers there, and their faces were pale as they pointed somewhere to Inspector Tatsuke after he arrived. The old man and I looked up almost simultaneously in the direction their fingertips were pointing.

There, among the leaves of the thick and overgrown elliptically shaped persimmon tree, was Nagami-san. He was looking down at us with a radiant smile on his face.

--Ughhhhhhhhhh.

A sense of nausea bubbled up inside my body. It was a distorted pale smile drained of blood I couldn't forget even if I wanted to. It was an artificial smile, as if pins were used to keep all the facial muscles in place, and the fact that only the head was present gave it an eerie appearance, as if a persimmon fruit was smiling.

"Tsk…"

As soon as the old man clicked his tongue, I staggered out of the house premises. The atmosphere was already too heavy, and I was at my limit. I really felt at home inside that stuffed frog.

Outside, there were even more rubbernecks than before. It was exactly what I expected: more rubbernecks calling for more rubbernecks. The people in the back must not have known what was going on. And it was only a matter of time before this would all be on television, and I sighed, despite being a rubberneck myself.

In the meantime, more and more patrol cars arrived to assist, and a wagon car loaded with what seemed to be forensics people in navy-blue suits; the site finally started to become noisy. I returned to M's house, as if to change places.

○

This time, the incident was reported in the newspapers. Not just the newspapers, but also on TV, day after day, night after night, and I became familiar with the case, even though I didn't like it.

The victim was Kōichi Nagami-san, a 38-year-old self-employed male who lived in K town of Chōfu city. The report of his head not being discovered at the scene of the crime, but instead on the branch of a tree in the garden became a news sensation (However, they didn't report the smiling expression on his face). The police began investigating the case as a possible accident or a murder. The first person who discovered the body was the wife of Nagami-san, 35-year-old Noriko-san. When she returned from walking their pet dog in the morning, she discovered the headless corpse of her husband. She was so terrified that she ran out of the house and collapsed on the street where she was helped by a neighbor. Thereafter, the police were called, and the crime scene was discovered. As of now, it seemed they still hadn't figured out why the head was placed on the tree branch in the garden. There were no eye-witness reports of anyone suspicious, and it seemed no one who bore a grudge against Nagami-san was identified – but this was just information from the news on television, there might have been a few suspects in mind, but for the time being, that was the official story published.

And thanks to this case becoming the talk of the town, the incident that occurred three days ago in the neighboring S-town was looked at closely as well. The commonly known 'Tengu Incident' that was made much about on the last day of school in M's class. However, it seemed the police weren't taking any proactive action in this case, and in irritation, the neighborhood watch held a meeting to see if they should go to the police for advice. Then, according to the mass media who caught wind of the developments, connected the two mysterious incidents to various things. The topics were veering in unimaginable directions, for example, the troubles surrounding the construction of the building for a new religious group around half a year ago, or that a serial killer on the run in Kyūshū was hiding close by, or even that it was because a manga artist famous for his brutal depictions lived nearby. Seeing the reporters on television excitedly discussing these stories, M's mother sighed on the sofa, "It would be nice if they would solve it quickly."

“It really is annoying. They've had to cancel all summer school activities, and if things go on like this, the summer festival is going to be canceled, too.”

Dressed in a tank top, M’s elder sister spoke in a huff.

“I have no idea what they were trying to do by placing only the head on the branch of the tree.”

Muttering those words – the mother suddenly looked at M sitting beside her. She must have thought it was a story a first-year elementary schooler shouldn’t hear. Incidentally, I heard their story unconsciously while inside Mr. Frog which was in M’s hand. And I recalled Nagami-san’s pale face and complacent smile looking down at me through the crevices in the branches, and a bitter feeling came over me again.

“Well, anyway, there’s nothing we can do by worrying about it here -- A. Make sure you're always with M.”

“Suuuure.”

A, a freshman in high school, must have had many summer vacation events she was looking forward to. Instead, she had been forced to look after her first-grade sister for almost 24 hours a day. She gave an unconcealed grimace even as she replied as such. From the tone of A's voice, M felt that she was something of a nuisance -- “I’m sorry.” She apologized to her sister in a tiny voice. A shrugged one shoulder in reply and said, “It’s not your fault,” before patting M on the head.

“Well, I’m off to work. Keep the doors locked tight. If anything happens, call our neighbor Oomine-san.”

“I know.”

“And, if a stranger comes, you don't have to answer the door.”

“Yes, yes, you’re getting late, right?”

After the conversation, M’s mother headed to work, leaving A, M, Leo and myself alone in the house.

“Well then.”

A spoke while lying down on the sofa and flipping channels on the television.

“I promised I’d go out with a friend this afternoon.”

“…Eeeh?”

“Can you stay at home by yourself?”

“But mom told us to stay together…”

“She did, didn’t she--? Um… well it can’t be helped, will you come along? I’ll treat you to some ice cream.”

“…But, are you sure it's safe to go outside?”

“I'm sure it's fine. I mean, everyone is living normally. It might be a good idea to avoid the streets late at night when no one is around, but there are TV reporters all over the place, and the police are patrolling the streets, it’s fine.”

“But... Is it alright if I come with you?”

“It’s alright. In exchange, dress up before we go. You had a cute dress, didn’t you? That one-piece.”

The two then went up together to M’s room. I was left alone on the sofa in the stuffed frog. Leo looked at me with a whimper. Are the two of them going out? Is what I felt he asked me, to which I answered, ‘That seems to be the case’.

Eventually, A came down dressed in short jeans layered together with a tank top. Ohhh, she looked super cute despite having a short bob haircut and her shoulders being bare. She looked gorgeous enough to blow away my unpleasant feelings in one fell swoop. As I was thinking that she was bound to be accosted by loads of bastards, M descended the stairs with a somewhat timid look on her face, Uwooooo, I couldn't help but open my mouth in surprise.

Dressed in a white summer one piece and a small straw hat, M was

really beautiful – no, those words were lacking. Her lustrous long black hair combined with her fair complexion made her look like a foreign model. No, she was like a fairy, an angel descended from the heavens.

“Yeah, you look cute.”

A grinned gleefully as she tapped M’s straw hat.

M looked down as if embarrassed, ‘Ah’, when she noticed me.

“Can’t I take Mr. Frog with me?”

“It’s not suitable! A stuffed toy doesn’t go with that outfit.”

“…Yeah, but.”

“You should let Mr. Frog relax sometimes. Mr. Frog will be looking after the house today.”

M eventually nodded in response. After that she picked me up and apologized, “I’m sorry.” Well, I was going to slip out of Mr. Frog and go with them, but—when she said that to my face, I felt like I had to stay behind and look after the house. In addition, Leo whined as to if to say, “Hey, you're not going to let me stay here alone, are you?” So, somehow, I ended up staying at home.

Well, you could say it was exactly the right time.

There were exactly ten days left from today until Takamura’s declared deadline. As expected, my inner thoughts were in turmoil. I had the choice to not believe Takamura, but even so, I had to take all possible precautions and think about what I could do. In any case, what was happening in this town right now? How was it related to M and her family? And what would be the best course of action for me to take? I was uncertain if I was bad at logical thinking because I was dead or because I was just innately bad at it, but at any rate, it was time for serious contemplation.

A and M left home a little after 1 PM.

The door was locked, the house was dead silent, with just me and

Leo.

Now -- let's think. Let's think things though.

I slipped out of the frog and sat on the sofa with my arms crossed, however, at that moment, Leo wagged his tail happily. No, wait a minute. I don't have time to play with you today. I told him that, but Leo had already brought a toy ball in his mouth and held it out to me. I was about to say, "I've already told you many times, I can't physically interact with this world, so I can't do anything even if you bring that to me"—when I suddenly realized.

I tried to pick up a felt-tip pen left behind on the table.

However, as expected, my fingers ended up slipping through. Not even the slightest sensation of touch could be felt in my fingertips. I thought I'd try going to the kitchen and running some water through my fingers, but that didn't work either.

…Ah, that's right.

I truly had nothing to do with anything in this world whatsoever.

I couldn't make the air quiver to send out my voice to others, nor could I write to convey my wishes. In short, even if I figured out something about this incident, it was impossible for an unsteady existence like me to communicate it to anyone who had anything to do with this case.

…Hey, what am I gonna do?

I was made to feel my place again after all this time and felt depressed, when—

Suddenly, the front doorbell rang.

Both Leo and I looked at the front door at the same time. But neither of us could answer. It felt uncomfortable in this situation, to not be able to answer even though we were here, as if we were pretending to be out. Sorry, please come again. As I was sending such a glance at the front door, the doorbell rang again. Darn, it must be some delivery, is what I thought as I tried approaching the door, when it

happened. Suddenly, the doorknob was turned and pulled gently. It merely swayed and stopped with a clunk as it was locked, but that act startled me.

--Eh? What? What the hell are they doing?

Leo gave a low growl from the back of his throat. It seemed that he, too, had sensed the abnormality of the situation.

(Wait.)

I restrained Leo with my hand, silently made my way to the entrance, and looked outside through the peephole.

An unfamiliar pale face was present there. A young man wearing a shaggy gray jacket. His expressionless pale face was devoid of blood. And his narrow eyes were filled with a strange light that made it hard to tell what he was thinking.

--T, this guy, who the hell is he? What the hell is he doing there?

I couldn't move even as I thought that. And, despite not having a heart, I still felt my pulse quicken. Come to think of it, human emotions are supposed to be governed by the mind, and yet, why is it that the emotions are actually felt inside the heart? When you receive people's affection, you feel pleased and your heart feels warm. When you're startled, your heart pounds. What's feeling is not the mind, but the heart. No, those things were inconsequential. At any rate, the thing I had to think about right now was who the hell this guy was.

As if holding my breath, I stayed extremely still as I examined the situation on the other side of the door though the peephole.

Thereupon, I recalled the word 'random attacker' from the conversation M's parents were having this morning. The man on the other side of the peephole was strangely in sync with the two incidents that had occurred in the periphery of town, the 'Tengu incident' and the 'Headless Incident'.

…Hey, it can't be.

As I stood in front of the entrance petrified—

The man on the other side of the peephole swayed in a large, slow motion to the right, and disappeared.

Remembering that the garden was in that direction, I rushed to the living room which faced the garden, and Leo followed me with a growl. I leapt into the living room and did a quick visual confirmation to see that the doors were locked. Eventually, that thin shadow wandered on the other side of the sash. Then, he abruptly stuck his face all the way up to the glass, as he began to peer in my direction through the laced curtains. I felt petrified, even though there was no way he could see me. The man stared motionlessly in my direction, before slowly looking around the interior of the house. I don't know how long I was glared at – before the man abruptly moved again. This time he moved to the direction of the rear garden. I, too, quickly rushed in the direction of the kitchen. In the far back of the kitchen lay the kitchen door that led to the rear garden. The key there must have been locked, right?

I quickly ran there with Leo and breathed a sigh of relief when I confirmed that the kitchen was locked properly. The kitchen door had a lattice design with a frosted glass set on it. The black shadow eventually appeared beyond that glass. The man did indeed put his hands on the doorknob and pulled. This time, he had the nerve to pull it with a little more force, and the door clattered and shook. And thereupon, Leo finally barked. It was the sharpest bark I had heard until now. I held my breath; The man on the other side of the glass stopped moving, too. Please. I prayed that he would flee after finding out that there was a dog present inside.

Was he the random attacker? Could it be that he was the culprit from both cases, and was targeting M's family this time? Aaah, was he related to the incident that would happen on the 31st of July that Takamura mentioned – no, no, there were still ten days left, it was far too soon, I fretted.

What should I do if those two sisters were to return and if that man were to hide in the backyard? No, even if he were to leave, how would I relay the events that had transpired here and now? How would I tell them that a strange man ended up trespassing in the garden while you guys were out? I couldn't even hold a pencil. I couldn't physically interact with this world.

At that moment--

The man didn't hide in the backyard, and neither did he leave… Incredibly, his actions became even more audacious. He took something out from his pocket and fit it inside the knob's keyhole. With a clatter and click, he began to fiddle with the keyhole.

…Eh, it can't be, this isn't a movie… there's no way he can open it that easily – as I thought that, the inner lock turned with a click. Which meant that in short, it opened. It ended up opening.

After that, the man slowly put the lockpick back in his pocket, looked inside for a bit, and put his hand on the doorknob once more. Then he slowly twisted and pulled.

The kitchen door opened with a creak right in front of me. Leo stood firmly in place on all four limbs and growled. I, too, aimed all the aura of animosity I could muster towards him. If ghosts really could curse someone to death, I tried to brandish that power here and now as I glared at his face.

The pale face that peeked in through the crevice of the door, was thin.

He was tall and looked to be in his twenties. His features were originally well-arranged like that of an actor, but his pale face gave a strong impression of being in poor health. His hair was long and carelessly slicked back, and his gray jacket was full of wrinkles as if he had slept in it for months.

Leo barked.

The man extended one finger in response – pointed it at Leo, and then brought it against his own lips.

"Shhhh--- please be silent."

He whispered in a hushed tone of voice which was unexpectedly overfamiliar.

He then narrowed his slender, foxlike eyes in the direction of me, who couldn't move.

“Yo, nice to meet you—is what I should say, right?”

I couldn’t even move a finger to respond to the words that were clearly directed at me.

“My name is Sako Takita.”

The man displayed his white teeth in a broad grin as he spoke.

“Even though I’m only a graduate student, but I’m still a head priest.”

○

“Now then—Where should I begin?”

The young man known as Sako Takita sat brazenly deep down on the sofa in M’s house, his long legs crossed and swaying gently.

“Anyway…huh? You are there, aren’t you?”

--Ah, I’m here.

I stood in front of the sofa with my arms crossed, and answered haughtily while looking down on the man. I felt a fear as to who this guy was, but on the other hand, I felt a nostalgia from his detached way of talking.

“No, at any rate, I know you are here in this house, but I can’t see you. I can see most of your everyday ghosts, but not you. Anyway, let’s start with introductions. I am university student studying comparative religions in one of Tokyo’s universities. Although I say that, I’ve previously worked as a Shinto priest, which is why I called myself a head priest earlier. To tell you the truth, Sako Takita isn’t my real name. Well, I guess you could call it a stage name, or a business name.”

That’s right – the reason I’m referring to this guy with his full name is because it’s not his real name. Moreover, it was strange that in his case, I couldn’t help but feel that even if it was his real name, it

wouldn't be a problem. Maybe it was because he had one foot thrust deeper in the world beyond than even me who was dead, or maybe this guy was a ghost himself…at any rate, his hopelessly weak sense of existence made me think so, but he was far too talkative to be a ghost.

"But you see, people usually realize how inexperienced they are when they start their careers. Disgracefully, I too am unable to escape the conventions of society and thus feel inadequate, so I thought I'd restart my studies from the beginning, but, you see, when I look around the world from multiple angles once more, my suspicion deepens: aren't the roots of the various religions in the world born from the same nature? I was deeply reminded once more to look at the world from a broader perspective —Eh? What am I talking about, you ask? Well, I'm speaking in turn so please don't fret. It's not something one should rush. I'm talking in turn so that you may comprehend. At any rate, I might be older than the other graduate students, but you can say that I truly obtained the right timing for studying. The occasion being the incidents occurring in this town right now, and the story you will be involved in from here on."

Hey, you don't mean…

(Are you talking about the incident in which M' family will be attacked ten days from now? Do you know what that's gonna be?)

I asked in a panic, but the man who introduced himself as Sako Takita just looked at me blankly. It seemed that he was different from the girl known as Takamura, in that my words didn't seem to reach him.

"…Hmm. To tell you the truth, I can't tell who you are, if you're a man or a woman, old or young. I can't see you, after all. But I am able to feel you. Whether you're angry, happy or disturbed, that's the kind of vibe I get. From there I can willfully converse by inferring your opinion, but you are *different* after all."

(…Different? What do you mean by different?)

"I recently realized that there are ghosts I can't see like you in this world, who come from the future, it was when I was researching

ancient Mikkyō religious scriptures in university. That scripture is not publicly acknowledged by Koyasan[7], but I happened to come across it through a source. In it was an interesting passage regarding a switch in perspective – for example, you believe that time flows from the past into the future, correct?"

…Hey, what are you talking about?

"Well, the majority of people in the past and today believe that to be the case, and in the religious view that everything began with the creation of the universe by the creator God, it is necessary in a sense. However, if the events of the past end up creating the entirety of the future, doesn't that mean that since the events of the past can't be altered, then the future can't be changed either? However, there is one way of thinking to solve this contradiction. That is to look at everything from reverse. That's right, the way of thinking in which the past is the result of the present."

Thereupon, Sako took out a cigarette from his pocket, and lit it.

But then he recalled that this was someone else's house and that he was trespassing right now. He hurriedly stood up and walked towards the kitchen, turned on the ventilation fan and began smoking in front of it. He looked uncomfortable as he looked around restlessly, it couldn't be helped, so I walked up to him.

"Sorry, I wonder if you can hear me. Let's continue the conversation, shall we? If the result of the present is the past, then the future rapidly approaches oneself, and without even stopping for a moment, passes through the self in the present and leaps back into the past. I believe you can imagine this sensation. In short, the future, which flows into you like raging billows from somewhere unknown is littered with infinite possibilities, and there is a thought that only those who make the most of it in the 'present' can create a successful past."

…Oi, I have no idea what you're going on about.

(Explain it more clearly, or just tell me the answer.)

Perhaps my annoyance got through to him, the young man known as

Sako looked at me as if he truly pitied me.

“…You don’t seem very bright, do you? Well, I suppose it’s alright. If one were to acknowledge the possibility of time flowing from the future to the past, wouldn't it be possible to overturn modern physics, which says that a person can go to the future but not to the past with his or her present consciousness? Well, the summary of that scripture did say that the subject would not be a living person.”

Ah, in short, it’s the thing Takamura was talking about, 『Spiritual things sometimes transcend time and space. 』

“In short, you, who are invisible are a ghost to me, but not an ordinary deceased person, it can be said that you are weak signals from the future accessing this point in time in the past for some unknown reasons.”

…Signals again, huh?

To sum it all up, all this guy wants to say is that I’m something that’s peeping into the past?

Ahh, be it signals or whatever. At any rate, why did I turn out to be like this, and tell me if there’s anything I can do in this world.

I appealed as such, but my complicated thoughts probably did not reach Sako.

“At any rate, you who are dead or on the verge of death in the future, have something you desperately want to know in this timeline. Well, I don’t know what that is, and I can't help you find out. Because I’m very busy with a lot of things, after all.”

A busy person wouldn’t be puffing smokes in a carefree manner, I rebutted.

“Ah, too much smoke for you?”

Sako drove away the tobacco smoke with one hand as if he cared.

(That’s not the problem here. What kind of person smokes when they’re trespassing?)

“No, well you could say that smoking is my only hobby, or my raison d'etre, to deprive me of that would be quite a cruel act, so won’t you please forgive me?”

Sako laughed nonchalantly, but I had completely forgotten about it because I had been taken in by this guy’s foolish persona. How did he know I was in this house, despite not being able to see me in the first place? And why did he go to the trouble of committing the crime of ‘trespassing’ by sneaking into M’s house?

“Oh, that's quite simple, really.” Sako shrugged his shoulders in response. This time, he seemed to have understood. “I was pursuing a certain psychic phenomenon – or you could call it a certain ‘ghost’. That’s why I came here to this town, but I simply mistook that to be you.”

--A certain ghost?

“There’s an elementary school girl in this house, correct? A fair-skinned, long-haired girl who’s quite beautiful. I merely caught a glimpse of her in town just the other day, but I understood that something was haunting her. That’s when I decided I’d meet her once and confirm it for myself but – well, it turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. You were not the ghost I was searching for. That’s right, it would have been far better if the thing I was chasing turned out to be something foolish like you. After all, the girl who’s being haunted is out and about, yet the thing that’s haunting her is relaxing at home without a care. And judging from the pooch ball that’s dripping in drool, you were extremely carefree as you played with the dog. You are quite defenseless. And haphazard.”

…Hey. Isn’t that going too far?

“Ah, apologies if I caused any offense. I didn't mean it in a negative way. At any rate, a simple case of mistaken identity – there's nothing more between you and me.”

Thereupon, he discarded the elongated tobacco ash on the portable ashtray he took out from his pocket, “Well then, I have no further business in this house”, before taking one last longing puff and stubbing it out.

He quickly moved to leave, causing me to panic.

(H…hey wait, wait a second! I have less than ten days left! Something terrible is going to happen to M's family! And since you're the only one in the world that can perceive me and likely to be of some help, help me solve my problem, even if it's just a little!)

I fervently made a fuss as I waved my hand and tried to stop Sako, who made a really annoyed look face in response as he looked back.

"Please take care of your own problems. Like I said before, I'm busy with my own business – Eh? What? Hmm… The two incidents that have occurred in the vicinity of this town?"

This bastard, he started making inferences all by himself about things I didn't even think about.

"I read about that in the newspaper, but it's not such a big deal, is it?"

(N, not a big deal you say? A person was hung from a tree that was seemingly unclimbable, and even though a head cut off by someone was found in the garden, you say that this isn't a big deal? No matter how you look at it, it's a case of a monster materializing!)

"…Ah, yes, yes. I understand. If I solve that then you can rest in peace – no, or maybe you're not dead, to be precise, but the problem will be solved, won't it?"

Sako took a deep breath and ruffled around his long hair.

"It can't be helped – a chance meeting that is preordained or something, is it? Well then, let's go and take a look now, shall we?"

○

"But the weather really is quite nice, isn't it? It's so peaceful you'd hardly believe it's a town where a series of bizarre incidents have

occurred."

Saying something like that, Sako lankily swayed as he walked in the residential area. I had no choice but drift behind in his stead.

"First let's try going to the house nearby where the headless case occurred. Umm, the 'Nagami' household, was it? Where is it…ah, we don't even need to look for it. It's the house over there with the swarm of crowds that regrettably look like they haven't gone back home in days."

Saying that, Sako drew close to the front of the Nagami household which was swarmed with a few dozen or so reporters. He stood up straight as he looked around the entire house with a relaxed expression on his face. His appearance was so peaceful that he appeared to nothing more than a shameless onlooker, but seeing his face right next to mine, a cold shiver ran down my back.

It was because of the look in Sako's eyes. Cold, emotionless, and hollow eyes. They reminded me of that girl named Takamura in a way, and there was a sense of dread in them, as if they were seeing right through this world.

"Hmm… I see."

Going around and seeing the entirety of the house surrounded by a fence, Sako muttered lazily when he reached the back of the house.

"So, this was the persimmon tree where the head was stuck in. Not under the Cherry blossom tree, but on top of the persimmon tree, is it? Ah, it does seem like he cut it off himself. And yet despite that, the person in question seems to be bewildered. Hmm."

Muttering such creepy things, Sako continued a few steps closer to the fence of the house, and while the reporters were giving him suspicious looks, he suddenly climbed up onto the fence. He then stretched his long fingers towards the branches of the persimmon tree. And thereafter, picked up *something* in his hand.

"Um, excuse me?"

A man with an armband of a major TV station, who seemed to be a

television reporter, came up behind him with a microphone in one hand.

“Are you related to this incident? Or are you from the police?”

“I’m merely a passerby.”

“Eh, wait, if you’re not involved, then please stop. This is inappropriate given that this is the scene of a crime.”

“Being told what is inappropriate from the fellows making a big fuss in front of other people’s homes at the crack of dawn is quite something.”

Replying aggressively, Sako stroked something invisible in his hand as if he cherished it. It was just about the size of a person’s head, causing me to take a step back, “Hey, it can’t be?”

“What did you take just now?”

“What, I'm trying to help you guys and the police –Hmm, it seems his consciousness was thrown off here from the head itself. Conversation isn’t really viable anymore.”

As Sako muttered that kind of thing, a uniformed police officer who was guarding the area near the entrance came running, perhaps noticing the noisy media.

“Hey! What are you doing?! Get down from there!”

“Well, please just wait a moment. He won’t be able to speak soon. If that were to happen, then the moments before his death are bound to become even more confusing.”

Sako narrowed his thin eyes to be even thinner and continued to mutter something with his lips. From the looks of it, Sako had found the *ghost of Nagami-san’s head* on the branches of the persimmon tree. I'm sure he’ll be thought of as a crazy person after giving that explanation, and if I wasn’t dead myself, I’d fully agree with that assessment a hundred percent.

“According to the reports, Kōichi Nagami-san is supposed to have

died on the second floor, and the window was closed. Only a married couple lived in this house with no children. And yet – he said, "a child". Who is that I wonder?”

Thereupon Sako turned around, and spoke to the police.”

“I suppose you won’t allow me inside.”

“O-of course not! Who are you?”

“Sorry for the late introductions. Here, please take a look.”

Even though it would have been better for him to come down, Sako crouched down on the fence, and with his left hand still clutching the invisible head, he skillfully took out a business card with his right hand. I took a peek, and the words therein were: “Sako Takita, Chief Priest of Okitachi Inari Shrine.”

“C-chief priest?”

“Yes, the late Nagami-san wished for a Shinto funeral when he was alive, and I am merely here to fulfill his wishes.”

--Hey, that kind of lie will get exposed right away.

I was worried, but the police did a visual comparison of the business card with Sako’s pale, featureless face, waited a while, and began to communicate with someone on the radio. Before he could even reach a decision, Sako nimbly jumped down on the other side of the fence, in short – on the side of the Nagami household’s garden. “Ah—Hey, wait a minute!”, a voice came from the other side of the fence, but without as much of a care, Sako quickly went around to the front entrance and ended up entering inside. I had no choice but to follow in his stead.

It was my second time in the Nagami household, and despite being daytime, it was deserted. Well, that was natural. The wife seemed to have returned to her parents’ home, and no one was present inside. It would be scarier to sense the presence of a person. Sako took off his shoes, and quickly entered inside. He turned his somewhat vacant gaze toward the second floor, and climbed up the stairs without hesitation.

There were three rooms on the second floor. One was presumably the couples' western style bedroom with a double sized bed. A second room that was presumably Nagami-san's study room. And the last one which was a Japanese-style room where the body was discovered, it seemed to be an empty guest room with only a vase of flowers present. Sako entered the Japanese style room after removing the yellow tape sealing it. He then bowed toward the white tape that marked the location of the corpse, then stepped over it as he opened the window.

"Yes, this room is the closest to that branch of the persimmon tree."

I looked at the scenery from the window and saw a member of the media below aiming their camera our way. It must have been their instinct as reporters to record anything that might happen right away.

Suddenly, Sako turned to me and called out.

"Are you there?"

--Yes, I'm here.

I answered, and in reply, Sako spoke with his hands still in his pockets.

"I mostly figured it out. Let's move on."

From there, we made our way to the neighboring S town, about a ten-minute bus ride away. As I recall, it was the incident where an old man who went by the name 'Niizawa' was found hanging from a tree in the grounds of the Inari shrine there. After asking passersby about the location, we arrived at the shrine just past 2 pm.

A dense thicket of trees lined both sides, and the path towards the shrine stretched in the center. Walking slightly leftward from the center of the stone paving, Sako spoke:

"There really is a god here. Shrines with gods are always enveloped

in a faint mist for some reason."

--Mist?

Come to think of it, there did indeed appear to be a faint mist in the air even though it wasn't early in the morning. I mean, if there really was a god here, then I was the one who wanted to implore them. I continued to walk a little nervously with this thought in mind, but no voice came down to me.

It must have been so because I lacked faith, right?

As I pondered such things to myself, "Aren't you mistaken about god?"

As he stepped on the gravel, Sako spoke as if narrating a monologue.

"The original god of this country you see, is not the almighty personal god like that in the west. It's something that has spilled from the realm where humans are not allowed to tread. It is something only to be feared, not something to ask favor of. If anything, a thing revered and sealed in order to minimize calamities."

--Calamities?

"That's right, most of them are curse gods."

With those creepy words, Sako eventually stopped a few meters in front of the main temple building. He stroked his thin beard as he looked around the surroundings, and I saw it. I heard that the old man was hung from a large ginkgo tree, but – I see, from a rough look around I could see a dozen or so ginkgo trees.

"Now then, which one was it?"

Muttering that, he drew close to each ginkgo tree and touched it by hand.

Eventually, he began to repeatedly stroke one of the large trees, and nodded.

"I guess this is it."

(…You can tell?)

“It’s far more unsettled than the other trees; It’s still shaking. Yes… this does seem a bit too thick to climb. It’s around four meters in height, and if we’re talking about branches not breaking if a person is hung from them– then was that…?”

He then looked around the surroundings restlessly, and eventually caught sight of a worn out shed next to the shrine office, headed over to it, and took the liberty of bringing a step ladder meant to be used for pruning. He brought it up close to the trunk and began to climb the ginkgo tree.

I was worried someone might come, but no one was passing by, as if the fact that a man had died had put everyone off.

“Ah, I see.”

Eventually, Sako’s voice came down from up above.

“I understand the gist of it. It wasn’t a significant incident after all – no, it wasn’t even an incident.”

Sako sat down on the branch where a dead man would have been hanging from just a few days ago, and spoke that kind of thing while yawning.

(Hey, I don’t understand at all. What do you mean you get it? Aren’t these two incidents the work of some psycho killer? Isn't he still hiding somewhere in this city, and in the next ten days, he’s going to make a move on M’s family, isn’t he?)

He must have sensed the intent of my unrelenting questions. The pale faced young man spoke, “Now, now, please calm down.”

“Firstly, the man who hung from this branch merely committed suicide. If there’s a death that’s considered suspicious in this country, then the autopsy is very thorough every time. It is true that the lack of good medical examiners in the field has led to a number of cases and accidents being misjudged, and it’s also true that the police are not as good at investigating as they once were, but the investigative organizations in this country aren’t that dumb yet.”

…Suicide?

No, if that's the case, then how did he climb up there?

"That was simple. He probably used that stepladder like I did. The problem is how the step ladder disappeared, but the truth is quite simple. *Someone* put it away."

……..

I was dumbfounded with the way Sako recited those words like poetry.

--Wa, wait a second. You mean to tell me that someone who put the step ladder away didn't notice the feet dangling above it? Even if the old man was around 170 cm in height, his legs would surely be in the field of vision, right?

"That is the unpleasant fact about this case. That someone put it away even after noticing."

(…Huh?)

"What would happen if a step ladder or anything to climb on wasn't discovered in the surroundings when they found the hanging body? It would probably cause a strong sense of discomfort at the scene. That's what someone was trying to do. They merely put it away because it would be amusing."

--Merely, amusing…?

"And that Nagami-san – was it? With the headless corpse. That was the same thing. Nagami-san cut off his own head with a terrible strength. You might question if that's possible with a human being's mental and physical strength, but it probably is. It's recorded that after Antoine Lavoisier was decapitated in the year 1794, he continued to blink for more than fifteen seconds. In 1904, the French physician Baulieu described how decapitated heads could react to their names being called. Looking at the direction of the corpse on the tatami floor, the direction of the blood spray, and the position of the head discovered on the persimmon tree, they all point to this as the most likely explanation. With a strong will. Nagami-san cut off

his head with his own hands, and the moment it separated from the body, it shot off towards the window, where it was caught in the branches of the persimmon tree."

(But, that window was closed, right?)

I saw it myself right after the incident had occurred. I saw that the window was closed together with that old inspector… "Ah", I suddenly realized.

"That's right. Because that window was closed, the crime scene became that of a different nature. Someone must have closed the window after Nagami-san had committed suicide. If that was done, then it would have the same effect on the people who discovered the headless corpse. The same effect as removing the step ladder, to create an intense sense of unease that clung to the area around the body.

……

"Why did Niizawa-san hang himself at the shrine, and why did Nagami-san cut off his own head? To be honest, I have no interest in that, and I'm sure the police will look into it. However, the reason the incidents became tinged with a bizarre aspect to them is definitely because someone added a slight sense of unease to the scene of the crimes. That's why these aren't even incidents."

That's all, the end – and with that, Sako quickly descended to the ground using the step ladder, and returned it to the shed.

○

As Sako had said, in contrast to the 'Whodunnit' rubberneck curiosity that had raged across Japan, the police investigation seemed to be leaning towards 'suicide' being the cause. "That's strange considering the fact that the head was discovered in the garden," is what the internet, the mass media and conspiracy theorists were spouting. However, it seemed unlikely that the course of the investigation

would be overturned based on the crime scene situation which had not been made public, of “Someone having closed the window,”. The question was who it was and why they did it, but it seemed the police had not been able to ascertain that far. If I was indeed looking at the past like Takamura had said, then it would have been easy to find out the truth if I could go back and forth in time more freely – is what I thought, but I couldn’t do it easily.

In the end, a gloomy air hung over the city, as two more days had passed since the incident. At the same time, that strange young man called Sako Takita ended up disappearing, and my thoughts without end coiled inside my head constricting my body.

There were only eight days left until Takamura’s proclaimed date of July 31. It would be great if August comes without incident and I can say to myself, “That bitch was telling a lie” – but for some reason, I didn’t think that was the case. I definitely had nothing but terrible premonitions as the day drew closer. There’s a phrase called ‘spirit sense’, and I wonder if I ended up becoming sensitive to it since I became a ghost. Anyway, I was being swept away by the cold river at night without resisting, and I couldn't get rid of the cold chill as if a bottomless waterfall lied in wait for me just ahead.

--Dammit.

Vague anxieties can be dispelled by taking action.

If I recall correctly, I think some genius shogi player said something like that. Staying inside the house, staying still inside the frog in M’s hand was comfortable but, I couldn’t do anything about this intensifying anxiety. Something might change if I took some action. And, the only person who could connect me to this world, where I couldn’t physically interact with anything, excluding the existence of Takamura who was like an inter-dimensional being, was Sako Takita right now. At any rate, shouldn’t I look for him, somehow convey this danger so that he could at least warn the family?

He could see ghosts. And he must be smart. And, that’s right. Didn’t Takamura say it as well? 『A graduate student appeared out of nowhere and settled the case like a great detective in the classics.』 That was referring to Sako, wasn’t it? To put it simply, if I could

somehow convey the information at my disposal, it felt something would change. No, I had to change it.

I strengthened my resolve, and flew out of the house.

In any case, I intended to search thoroughly for Sako Takita's whereabouts to the utmost of my ability. He said he was chasing after some paranormal phenomenon. It was the reason he was in this town. Which meant that he should still be wandering around, investigating something. Perhaps he could be looking around all over town even if it took him all night or something – and as I arrived at the station, I easily found Sako there.

The pale young graduate student cum chief priest was pecking at his chocolate parfait or something, sitting on the second-floor terrace of a coffee shop that overlooked the roundabout in front of the station.

(--Hey, Sako.)

I called out to him as soon as I got there, but he merely threw a glance in my direction and ignored me. I flew into a rage and hurled all the abuse I could muster close at him, Sako looked annoyed and brought his finger to his lips.

"Shh, please be quiet. Your existence is invisible to everyone. If I answered you here, I'm going to look like a weird guy mumbling to himself."

He whispered in a small voice as he took a peek around.

(Never mind that, I need your help. It's an emergency!)

"You seem quite agitated, but I'm afraid it's not my job or duty to help you."

Sako whispered as he lovingly savored the spoonful of ice cream, chocolate and fresh cream. It might have been a time of supreme bliss for him, but I ignored all of that as I spoke. I talked about how I met the girl named Takamura, how at the end of the month – no, how in just eight days, M's family would be assaulted in an incident that would remain unsolved even ten years into the future. How I wanted to prevent it at all costs. I asked him if he could at least call

or give that family a letter to warn them.

Narrating the story non-stop without pause left me exhausted as expected. Wasn't this asking too much of a ghost? I looked at Sako, who, whether he was listening or not, was plunging his spoon into the end of the glass bottle to dig out the ice cream with a demure expression on his face.

(Hey, do you understand what I'm saying?)

"That's why, I'm troubled you see. I know you're vehemently trying to communicate something, but like I told you before, you're not a normal ghost. I can't hear you, and I can't understand exactly what kind of problem you have. Look, that couple of girls over there see me muttering to myself and are eyeing me suspiciously, aren't they?"

"Do I care? Look, please, the incident still hasn't been settled. I'm sure that something more is going to happen – no, maybe the real thing is just beginning. Even if those two incidents were suicides, some guy crazy in the head must have tampered somehow and created a sense of unease, right? They did it just for the fun of it, right? Isn't that dangerous? Isn't it possible that guy might perpetrate something else in this town?"

"I have a job to do. I sympathize with you, but I can't help you."

Finally realizing how loud his voice had become, Sako lowered his voice, but – no, wait a minute, that's it, I leapt.

(Who is the 'ghost' you're looking for?)

I asked, and perhaps sensing the mood of my question, Sako took a deep sigh and spoke.

"The name of the 'thing' I'm chasing after is inconsequential at this point. The name has changed over the ages, and the earliest accounts of it can be traced back to the Nara period."[8]

--N, nara period?

"It keeps changing the person it possesses, a troublesome spirit that spreads misfortune wherever it goes."

Thereupon, Sako looked longingly at the glass of chocolate parfait he had just finished eating, took a cigarette out of his pocket and lighted it. I looked at the relaxed Sako blowing tobacco smoke around, and spoke irritably:

(Then why are you slurping Chocolate parfait in a place like this when you're searching for something dangerous like that? Can you afford to sit around and take a smoke?)

In response, Sako unexpectedly whispered a question at me.

"Have you heard of the illness known as antisocial personality order?"

…What?

"To put it simply, it's the mental disposition of irrepressibly experiencing joy in destroying the peace. It is said to be a central nervous system dysfunction found in many criminals who are commonly referred to as serial killers, but not all of it is understood yet. Not everyone with antisocial personality disorder will commit crimes, and they are not aware of their malicious intent in the first place. The destruction of order is as natural as eating a meal to them. The norms of good and bad are completely alien to them. They follow their curiosity – they destroy their surroundings, simply because it's amusing."

Something nasty crawled down my back upon hearing those words.

"But you know, it would still be better if that disease were to afflict a flesh and blood human. Because you can flee from them, or restrain them. But what if it was a ghost? What if it were an existence invisible to the human eye? Wouldn't that be a modern-day curse god?"

Hearing those words – the vague anxiety in my head finally took shape.

The twisted smile of that girl in the black dress was, right now, clearly drawn in my head.

『Because it's fun, after all.』

Her lips twisted into a sneer, Takamura's tomboyish looks spread across my retinas.

That's right – our sense of values was fundamentally different. They were out of sync. That's what made me shudder at the time. Could it be that… Takamura is the ghost Sako is searching for? If Sako's story were to be believed, could Takamura have been changing the person she possessed and spread misfortune wherever she went? No – no, wait. If that were the case, doesn't that mean that Takamura deliberately warned me of her actions in advance? Is that why she told me to wriggle? To squirm? Ah, but somehow it feels like she's capable of anything. And also, didn't she say that crazy line at the end? 『Show me a fightback so magnificent that I fall in love with you.』

(Hey, Sako!)

I yelled. (You need to move right now! I know who it is, so do something quick about it! I'll haunt you until you help me. And if something happens to M's family, I'll curse you until you die!) I shouted as I waved my arms and legs in the air, but of course, it didn't reach Sako. However, it seemed my panicked mood got through to him.

(…Hmmm?)

Sako rose from his chair, and looked in my direction.

"It seems you know something, and you have a strange obsession with that family. In short, you mean to say there's some sort of connection between the family and the ghost I'm searching for?"

I vigorously nodded my head.

"Hmm…alright, understood. I have no other leads to go on either way. It'll be my first experience trying to do something by teaming up with a ghost, but well, it might be interesting. Communication will be a bit of a problem, though."

I looked up to Sako's tall figure as he spoke those words – and felt a relief deep enough to make me collapse to my knees.

Without any clues, I still didn't know what to do in the face of this inexplicable danger – but, even still, I was able to gain one ally for the time being, and a hope began to sprout within me, that if things went well, I might be able to save M and her family.

However—

I should have paid more attention to the words Sako had spoken earlier.

In the Nagami household, Sako picked up the invisible thing resembling Nagami-san's head and spoke.

『And yet – he said, "a child".』

It happened early morning on the following day.

At school, M's best friend, Kii-chan… was discovered at the bottom of the pool.

Case 00 – Chapter 3: Yoishi

It was a lukewarm rainy day.

Kii-chan's funeral was held at a Buddhist temple close to the school, and although it was summer vacation, almost all of M's classmates and their parents were in attendance. The spacious temple grounds were filled with countless umbrellas, with around half of them being little yellow ones.

All of them wore grave expressions with their heads hung down, and M was also there with her mother. I couldn't bear facing her, to see her beautiful face distorted as it was. How should a first-year elementary schooler come to terms with a person's death? Did I experience the loss of a close friend when I was alive?

I stood alone at the back of the crowd as I pondered on such things.

The temple was located at the top of a hill. At the bottom, countless reporters were loitering around with cameras in their hands. Would the death of this elementary schooler end up being reported as a continuation of the strange incidents that occurred in S and K town? I knew from Sako's explanation that the two incidents (where someone added a sense of unease) were simply suicides, but the public might have continued to believe that there was still some killer lurking somewhere. And, Kii-chan's mysterious death might have been presumed to be the work of that killer.

According to the conversation M's mother had with the other parents on the phone, Kii-chan went alone to the school's pool in the middle of the night. It was not yet known if she was alone or with someone. She had no external wounds, and the cause of death was drowning. The pool was surrounded by a wire fence and the entrance was locked, but it wasn't impossible to climb over it. In fact, there was a previous incident where some boys in the school had snuck inside to play in the middle of the night without permission, and gotten

punished for it. In short, it wasn't known if it was an accident, something insidious, or -- the possibility I didn't want to think of – of it being a suicide. The only immovable truth was, that a young girl only six years of age ended up departing this world.

The time to carry out the coffin finally arrived, and I raised my head.

As the car horn honked, the hearse carrying Kii-chan slowly started to move.

All at once, the sounds of the children rang out, "Kii-chan!" "I hate this," "Thank you," "Goodbye," Even my own nose prickled, heavy with emotion. When I think about how much she was loved, something swelled up inside me at the absurdity of her passing at such an age once more.

In the midst of all this, I suddenly caught sight of a man standing at the back of the crowd, his head hung down and his hands joined together.

He seemed familiar somehow, and as I fixed my gaze at him, I remembered. It was the plain clothes detective I happened to see in that 'Headless incident' at the Nagami household – If I recall, he was an old guy named Tatsuke. He wore a scruffy navy-blue suit and worn-out leather shoes, and like me, he was drenched in the rain without an umbrella.

I felt some kind of kinship with him, and when I drew close, I heard him whisper under his breath, "That poor girl." But, after that—

"…I'll make sure to get them for this."

Hearing the old man add that, I cocked my head in puzzlement.

--Get them?

Did that mean the police believed it was the work of a killer?

Unconsciously, I was midway through asking him just what the hell he meant, but of course, my voice didn't reach the old man. After seeing the hearse go downhill, pass through the hordes of reporters with their camera flashes and drive off, he started walking towards

the group of uniformed policemen waiting outside.

Ahh, that old man knew something. I wanted to ask him what the hell that was. If only Sako was here – I was gritting my teeth, when—

"…Um…Mr. Inspector?"

An unexpected voice called out to the old man.

I looked to see that it was M. The old man, whose clothes were drenched from the rain, brushed off the raindrops on his shoulders two to three times, turned around to face M, who was dressed in a black blazer and skirt, he bent down and softened his expression slightly.

"Yes, that's correct, young lady."

"…Ummm, about Kii-chan…"

"Yes?"

"—Who was inside Kii-chan?"

…Huh?

Hearing M's question, me and the old man's eyes widened at the same time.

"Young lady, were you a friend of hers?"

In response, M gave a small and firm nod.

"Do you know what that question means?"

Seeing M nod once more –

The old man told one of the uniformed police officers behind him to bring an umbrella. However, the police officer merely glanced at him before outright ignoring him. It seemed he was cut off from his colleagues as always. After clicking his tongue for a bit, the old man opened the trunk of the patrol car by himself, took out a plastic umbrella and held it out.

Thereupon, M's mother rushed in. She put her hand on M's shoulders, and looked at the inspector with a dubious expression.

"Um, do you have some business with my daughter?"

"Ahh, are you her mother? Umm…I wanted to ask her some questions about the child that passed away."

"Please save it for another day. It's too much on a day like this."

In reply, M spoke to her mother, "It's fine."

"There's something I want to ask as well."

M's mother fell silent as if she were overpowered by M rarely expressing her will so straightforwardly. As she looked alternately at the old detective and her daughter in distress, the old man turned to the mother and bowed, "Please let me speak to your daughter for a few minutes."

M and the old inspector moved to a park bench located just outside the temple.

I, of course, accompanied them. M's mother was looking at our direction from a little further away, with her umbrella held up. Was she still somewhat distrustful of the inspector, or was she simply worried about M's expression? It was likely the latter.

"So young lady, did you notice something about that girl?"

They arrived at the bench, but since it was wet with the rain, neither M nor the old man sat down. They remained standing as they began their conversation in front of the bench.

M was silent for a while with her head cast downwards, but when she eventually raised her head, her eyes were filled with tears.

"Kii-chan was my best friend."

"……."

"She was so kind, and she really cared about me; Even though I

always ended up taking so much time thinking about the things I wanted to say…she would patiently wait for me, and, it was something no one else would do for me, so that's why… that's why, I knew Kii-chan really understood my thoughts…"

Large drops of tears streamed down her cheeks as she spoke. All the old man and I could do was to bite our lips and watch.

"But--" Thereupon, M wiped her tears and spoke. "But, one day, Kii-chan disappeared."

"…Disappeared?"

"Since summer vacation started, Kii-chan hasn't been Kii-chan."

"….."

--What did she mean by that?

I cocked my head in puzzlement, as Yoishi spoke while choosing her words carefully.

"…Even though the body was Kii-chan's, and even though the face was Kii-chan's… but, that wasn't Kii-chan. Her eyes were so dark, pitch black… and also, Kii-chan didn't laugh like that. But… no one would understand that… I didn't know who I should tell it to…"

It was a strange way for M to speak, with insistence and emotion. The inspector gave a single deep nod and placed his rugged hand on top of M's head before slowly stroking it.

"You noticed it, didn't you?"

His words startled me.

"Yes, that's right. That girl probably wasn't Kii-chan."

The inspector led M to a bench with a roof, where he took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He took out the last remaining cigarette in the pack and put it in his mouth, then he crushed the pack, and lit the cigarette with his lighter. Thereafter, he remained silent for a while, staring at the rain. He seemed hesitant on whether or not it

was a story he should tell a first-year elementary schooler, but perhaps because of the serious look in M's eyes as she looked up to him, he made his decision, and finally began to speak.

"I call it 'The migrating malice'."

The old man began to open up.

"The first time I met 'it'… was around twenty years ago. Back when I was still stationed as a uniformed officer in a police box. It was the end of the year, and I was almost at the end of my shift. It was the coldest time when the sun was about to come up – and I got a call on the radio. A man was on a rampage in front of the station, attacking passersby with a knife. I quickly rushed over there together with three of my colleagues, and found a man staggering in the roundabout in front of the station yelling something. I tried to make sense of it as I got closer, but it was all gibberish. We thought he might have been on drugs or something. There were two male students collapsed nearby, who appeared to have been stabbed. There was also a woman pressing down on a place near her shoulders. When a colleague aimed his gun at him and warned him to throw away the knife, the man looked our way. The way he looked at me – I still shudder when I remember it. How should I put it, it was like a hole, a dark hole that had pierced through his eyes."

……

"After that, he started moving in a strange way. A jerky movement that seemed to loosen his body, like a dance. We warned him once more. We told him to throw away the knife and to lie down on the ground. It was right then and there. I thought the man made a slanting, falling movement, before he plunged a knife into my colleague's stomach. I immediately fired a shot into the man's leg. That was the first time I fired a shot at the scene of a crime, but – my colleague shot an additional round that struck the man in the stomach. The man recoiled backwards and collapsed on the spot. I could hear the screams and angry shouts all around me. I secured the man, while my colleague tended to the stabbed officer as he shouted over the radio to HQ for backup and an ambulance. In the commotion – I heard it. As I pressed down my arm on his stomach, the man smiled and spoke, 『This body is of no further use.』"

“…This… body?”

“That’s right, young lady. I’m certain the man said that. He kept cackling all the way in the ambulance, but died before reaching the hospital. After looking into it afterwards, he seemed to have been an earnest worker at a bread factory in Gunma. There were no signs of drug use, and we never found out why he came to Tokyo and why he did what he did. He was his mother’s only child. She was quite pitiful as she kept bowing her head and apologizing to the flood of reporters. The case file had a record of the words the man had said to me, but they were soon forgotten. I felt unconvinced as if something was amiss, but I myself thought the case was over. However – it was around two years later. On that that day, I got a report about a mother screaming with a child in her arms on the handrail of a footbridge. I was no longer in uniform at the time, but I was close by and heard it on the radio so I ran towards the scene. There, a young woman was surrounded by several police officers. At first glance, I noticed how bizarre it was. With one slender arm, she dangled her frightened, flailing child upside down over the edge of the footbridge. She cackled and laughed right above the barreling traffic. The officers were trying to talk her down, but it was like their words didn’t even reach her. The highway was underneath, so we couldn’t put cushions or anything. As I thought desperately about what to do, it happened. The woman looked at me with hollow eyes that were like holes. She then smiled and spoke, 『Yo』. In a masculine tone of voice, she said, 『Long time no see』. I asked her if we had met before. And in response, she pointed at her stomach and feet, and laughed again, saying, 『Didn’t you shoot me before? 』”

A shiver ran down my spine. I finally began to piece the puzzle together. In short, what was it? Could ‘The migrating malice’ possibly mean – that the same personality inhabited two different people?

“The woman spoke. She said that humans are sacks of blood. That if I were to drop this one from here, everyone will understand that; when suddenly without warning, she dropped the child. Everything went silent as if time had frozen for a moment, before I heard a horrible sound, and the screams of people passing by. We instantly arrested the woman. I asked her as she was pinned down, ‘Why would you do something like this?’ In reply the woman just laughed and said,

『Because it’s fun, after all』. ”

….Huh…….?

“The way she tilted her head, and her strange twisted smile – it was enough for me to confirm it. It was the same as the man from that time. The thing that was inside the man from back then, was right now, in the shape of a woman in front of my very eyes. I couldn’t tell if ‘it’s’ real gender was that of a man or a woman. I didn’t know if it was young or old. Anyhow, I don't think words got through to it. No, not words, but things like morality or values. Seeing an existence like that with my own eyes which was out of sync with everything for the first time made my knees tremble.”

The old man glanced downwards with a bitter look on his face, threw his cigarette down on the spot and smothered it with the sole of his shoe.

"Listen young lady. I've seen a lot of criminals up until now, and there's no such thing as being evil from birth. There are only weak people. Most of them are hopelessly weak people who couldn't stop themselves from indulging in crime. But that was different. I don't know if it would be appropriate to describe it as such, but that was a demon, no, pure unadulterated evil -- yeah, if I dare say, what you'd call absolute evil."

"Demon" -- "Unadulterated evil"... "Absolute evil".

I felt the blood leaving my entire body as I repeated the words inside my head.

"When I heard about the cases in S and K town, I felt a strange sense of unease."

"...A sense of unease?"

"Ah, by a sense of unease, umm, the fact that I couldn't picture the culprit -- a shiver that made me feel like I wasn’t dealing with a human being. When I stood at the scene of the crime, my premonition became a certainty. Ahh, it's the same as that time, is what I thought. At any rate, I have a feeling as if 'it' has appeared

once more. I can't help but feel it's here somewhere in town, and that right now, it's trying to do some kind of experiment. What can it do with the human body and how far can it go? I have no idea what it's trying to do. However, it has some goal in mind which it’s trying to achieve."

"You can't capture it?"

In response to the question, the old man showed a bitter smile.

"That's exactly it. Young lady, I'm sure you're thinking what exactly the police are doing when they're supposed to catch the bad guys. But on top of the question of how to capture something like malice -- the problem is who would believe you. You see, young lady, the number of officers who noticed 'its' existence is very little. No, at the moment I'm the only one."

The old man muttered bitterly,

(--Heey, I know who that is!)

I unintentionally screamed out loud.

(I saw it. I met and spoke to it! And her ultimate aim is for this girl and her family!)

I spat out loud, but of course, my voice didn't reach the detective or anyone else.

"There are no official documents within the police. And none of my colleagues believe me. Thanks to that I'm treated like a weirdo, and they already think I'm crazy in the head. My superior bluntly told me that as well. Well, it can't be helped because that bastard only cares about his career. " He clicked his tongue as if reminded of someone, "Besides that, there's another reason I can't capture 'it'."

The old man spoke.

"I don't know who it's hiding inside right now."

....Ah.

"That's right, that thing is always inside people. It keeps moving from body to body. When that body dies, it moves on to the next one. I don't know what criteria it uses to select its host, or how to stop it."

“Despite that…” The old man looked at the town drenched in rain and spoke.

"Even now, ‘it’ is inside someone in this city."

○

Demon… Unadulterated evil... "Absolute evil".

What was a demon in the first place? Umm, was it something with black wings, and horns? I think it was something with a sheep-like head, and wasn’t there something that was like a fly? At any rate, they were a representation of the evil in this world according to Christianity. However, the more I tried to draw the image of a demon in my head, the more I recalled the figure of that girl in the black dress. That day, on top of the guard rail of the rooftop, the image of that grinning girl holding the black umbrella who called herself Takamura vividly drew itself in my mind.

She seemed androgynous, with a boyish tone of voice – and there was a creepiness in her gaze, as if she was looking down on everything, and yet, she also had a divinity about her as if she had transcended anything and everything.

--The truly fearsome ‘evil’ is the one that appears wearing a mask of justice.

I felt I heard those words before from somewhere. She had purposefully told me I was weak radio signals peering into the past and told me what would happen at the end. But, was that really an act of good will? No… wasn’t it because it would be ‘entertaining’ that way?

Not understanding it well, I somehow made my way to the library the next day. Knowledge was what I needed at any rate. I thought I'd read up on material related to demons. However, as expected, I couldn't touch the books.

After idly wandering among the bookshelves for a while, I suddenly realized I was in front of the book search terminal next to the stairs. Weren't touch panels meant to detect signals from the fingertips? The thought struck me, and from there, Ohhh, I realized. That's right, didn't both Sako and Takamura call me 'weak signals'? Didn't that mean I could fiddle with this terminal? No, that would only tell me where a specific type of book was located in this library. More so than that, couldn't I go further out – couldn't I access the internet itself?

I went inside the loaning counter and stood in front of a computer that seemed to be connected with the internet. I imagined the idea of possessing the computer, in the same knack I used when entering the stuffed frog. After experiencing several failures – that world suddenly appeared.

I was present in a vast, infinite darkness.

A darkness that spread out no matter where I looked, bottomless enough to make me lose my mind.

It was a success. It was great to yell out in delight, but it was completely dark and vast there. If I wasn't self-conscious of the fact that I had thrown myself into the sea of the internet, it was a space infinite enough to make me forget who I was. In the dark space where I was unsure if I was looking up or down, my will was everything. A strong will could bestow direction to weak radio signals, and made my destination clear. I concentrated my thoughts on the information I was looking for, and somehow managed to reach the articles on 'demons'. I was confused by the myriad of information that appeared in front of me, but I still read through them from cover to cover. Be it in English, Italian, or ancient Latin – strangely enough, I could understand them. Midway through, I unconsciously accessed top secret Vatican archives and looked through the 'Dead sea scrolls', and the Fatima prophecies, but emmm… What I saw there was irrelevant at this point, so I'll leave it out. At any rate, I was looking

for demons. I racked my brain and single-mindedly read through everything about their true nature, their birth, their beginnings – however, in the end, there was nothing that seemed useful to me right now.

But that was to be expected. Most of the things that were called demons were things created by humans at some point in the past. Baal, Lucifer, Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Furfur, Azazel, Samael, Leviathan – they were fearsome in their illustrated appearances, almost all of them creations. It felt like the 'pure malice' M and the old man spoke of was something different altogether.

However, how much time had passed since then – suddenly, I felt a cold air.

It might have been because I was in a dark world surrounded by countless descriptions of demons. It felt as if something was staring at me from beyond the unfathomable darkness. I felt a fear as if the body of information that was me was being overwritten by something that called itself a demon.

So, in the end - I left the library without gaining any information.

And then, when did it start, I wonder--

That strange rumor began to spread.

A rumor that said that Kii-chan's ghost appeared in the classroom of the elementary school late at night.

○

(…Hey, hey, don't do it.)

I was vehemently against it of course, but M had firmly made up her mind. Late at night, after she made sure her family had gone to sleep, she began to change to an inconspicuous black shirt and black skirt.

“Come with me.”

M whispered as she crammed a pocket light, together with me – who was the stuffed frog, inside her pocket. It seemed she wanted it as a good-luck charm. And I had no choice but to accompany her.

“If Kii-chan really is inside the school late at night…”

M spoke as she silently locked the front door of the house.

“I feel like maybe there’s something she wants to tell me…”

(…Well, about that. Ghosts usually have some kind of lingering attachment to this world, but there are also incomprehensible ones like me who wander around aimlessly, and in today's world, there are dangerous individuals with an abnormal inclination for little girls. It is not advisable to leave the house alone at midnight.)

I desperately tried to make her listen, but M kept her lips pursed as she silently made her way to the elementary school.

It was past 1 am late at night.

In the town where a series of strange incidents had occurred in rapid succession, only a few people roamed the streets at night. M walked alone in the quiet town, which was bathed in only the pale moonlight. When a patrol car doing its rounds passed by, she quietly hid in the shadows of a telephone pole, let it pass by before hurrying to the elementary school at night.

Kii-chan’s body was discovered at the bottom of the pool by a gym faculty member who came to clean it in the morning. Kii-chan was in her normal skirt dress, and it was not yet known if she went there late at night, or in the evening when people had left. Did she slip and fall – or did someone drop her in? Whatever the case, it was a mystery, as Kii-chan was said to be a good swimmer. In addition, there was another news report that raised a question. Kii-chan had left the house saying, “There’s something I have to look into”. Kii-chan liked books and often went to the library, so her mother didn’t seem to have any misgivings at the time. However, on that day, Kii-chan wasn’t seen in the municipal library nor in the school’s library.

What gave more credence to that testimony was that Kii-chan was a little famous at the library for borrowing books so often. What in the world was Kii-chan trying to look into? And why did she go to the swimming pool instead of the library?

The public was focused on that point – but M and I had another idea.

“If it was Kii-chan, I think she would have gone to the library.”

….

“…If it was the real Kii-chan, that is.”

The elementary school we reached at last, towered as a black shadow in the darkness.

--Eeeeek.

Why do schools look so creepy late at night? I hesitated when looking into the other side of the classroom window. The darkness between the curtains makes me think I'm about to see something terrible, freezing my legs in place. That’s right, even ghosts are afraid of scary things. Cars that overtake me at a reckless speed scare me, large dogs that bark like crazy make me jump, and late-night TV horror specials give me goosebumps. Whether dead or alive, what people fear is the same.

“Isn’t… there someplace that’s unlocked?”

M spoke as she tried to open classroom windows here and there, but the locked windows would not budge. She eventually muttered, ‘I got it,’ and ran off somewhere with the light pointed down at her feet.

It was a sort of passageway that seemed to connect the main school building to the gymnasium. After climbing down to the passageway from outside, M approached the school building.

“A boy in my class told me. He said that the window lock here was broken and loose.”

As she said that, she creaked the window open with her small and slender hands.

As we crossed over the windowsill and descended into the school building, a painful silence greeted us.

The elementary school we went to almost every day was always full of hustle and bustle to the point of being noisy. Was it because of that? I felt the presence of several people in the air even though it was late at night, even though no one was supposed to be there. The dim red light from the emergency lamps appeared, and only the light from the moon shone in through the window.

M slowly made her way down the corridor, holding a light in her left hand, and me (the stuffed frog) in her right hand.

She proceeded straight to her classroom on the first floor, and creaked open the sliding door.

The interior was dark, with a faint light pouring in through the gap in the curtains. Thirty small chairs and desks were evenly aligned to face the teacher's desk.

"…Kii-chan?"

M called out in a small whisper.

But, of course, there was no one to answer. There was no sound, only the lukewarm midsummer air filled the surroundings.

Before I'd realized… I was standing next to M. I didn't quite know why I came outside the stuffed frog. But for some reason, an extreme sense of nostalgia suddenly overflowed within me.

I felt – like I once walked with someone in the endless darkness.

I kept stepping into a forbidden world I was not allowed to go to.

Somewhere moldy, dusty, dark and cramped. I was in fear of something lurking in that darkness, and I was always brought to tears. And then I would always blurt out the same line. "Hey, let's stop." In response, the someone beside me would say something back. In a cold, clear voice, like the ringing of a bell, it would ask a question in return. What were those words --- Ah, it was no use. I couldn't remember. At any rate, those words would shake the earth

on which I stood, and made me feel as if I was still only at the gateway to true terror.

However… did I really hate that from the bottom of my heart?

No, it was like I was having fun somehow. It felt as if my heart was pounding with excitement when I ventured forth into a forbidden world together with that person. It felt as if there was someone desperately trying to stop me from going to those places, but I would always shake them off and leap into the paranormal. It was a strange, grotesque and fascinating world, like returning to one's mother's womb, or submerging oneself in a bottomless, tepid liquid--

As I thought that, I heard footsteps.

M had left the classroom, and headed to the corridor. I ran after her in a panic.

“It might be somewhere else.”

Her strained voice echoed in the corridor, as M aimed her light at the stairs.

(--Say, it might be too late to ask, but…)

I spoke the thoughts that had been bugging me for a long time.

(Why did such a rumor spread?)

Of course, my voice didn’t reach M so it was almost completely monologue, but disregarding that, I continued to speak.

(Kii-chan drowned in the pool, didn’t she? Then the fact that she died in the pool, and based on my experience, it would be normal to think that she would be close the pool after death and be thinking, “Why am I in a place like this?” If that were the case, isn’t it strange that the rumor became, “Kii-chan’s ghost appeared in the elementary classroom late at night”, rather than “Kii-chan’s ghost appeared in the pool”.)

I had muttered that far to myself when a cold ran through my back.

--No… wait a minute. In the first place, who started that rumor? I heard it from M, but who did M hear it from? Only janitors or teachers on duty are likely to be walking around in primary school classrooms late at night. So, did the janitors or teachers start it? But, was that a rumor the school staff would spread at a time like this? It hadn't even been two days since the funeral, and would they start that kind of imprudent rumor….?

I had thought that far when something even colder crawled down my back.

That's right… this too is what you would call a sense of unease. Sako said it as well. In both the Tengu incident and the beheading incident, someone added a sense of unease at the scene of the crime. The scenes of ordinary suicides became bizarre because of that.

"—Hey, M. Who did you hear this rumor from?"

However, the moment I was about to place my hand on M's shoulder to ask her the question.

"The truly scary stories, are inconsistent in some way."

In the darkness, M muttered just a few words.

"That's why, if it was consistent – then I'm sure it won't be scary anymore."

Gazing at her beautiful, pale, tensed profile – Ah, I realized.

--Even M was scared.

It was no wonder. There was no one who would willingly want to go to an elementary school late at night. But because Kii-chan was said to be there – because it was the girl who was her best friend, M went to all the trouble of coming here at a time like this.

"I still haven't said goodbye... And I haven't even thanked Kii-chan… for all the things she did for me."

I could say nothing in response to her broken, hoarse cries.

M was that kind of girl. There were times when she tried so hard to convey her true feelings in speech, where she became unable to say anything at all in the end. There must have been times when she thought of herself as unpleasant, and there must have been times when she wanted to cry. In such a world, Kii-chan was the only one M could convey her true thoughts to. The only one who tried to understand M, and the only who actually did understand her.

A feeling of shame together with a strange feeling overflowed from within me as I witnessed the brave feelings of a six-year-old girl who was trying her best to move forward step by step with her frail legs.

Perhaps it was a kind of courage.

Before I'd realized, I was walking right alongside M. I decided that no matter what would happen from here on, I would stay by her side. I mean, of course I intended to be by her side all the way, but I felt that it was the feeling of being close to her physical body. Rather, I had made up my mind to be close to M's clear feelings, no matter what. My doubts about whether I could physically do anything to protect her would go on endlessly, and to be honest, my knees were trembling with fear, but despite that, this was all the sincerity I could muster. At the very least, I had the pride to not be walking behind a girl this young.

However, as if to crush my spirits, I heard a crunching noise echo in the corridor, as if a twig had been stepped on.

With a start, I looked up ahead, feeling as if something ahead in the corridor had moved. My heart, which was supposed to have stopped, began throbbing violently. The thumping pulsations were rapidly increasing. Were these… pulsations supposed to be that? A type of phantom limb – in short, the psychological condition where a person who has lost his arm still feels an itchiness where the arm was supposed to be.

It felt as if the darkness in the corridor ahead had become even stronger.

If I recalled correctly, the staircase lay up ahead – but right now, I was certain.

It felt as if something was ascending those stairs.

(H…hey, let's give up.)

I looked at M from the side and said that, as expected.

--Public elementary schools generally have a long history. In that long history, who knows how many students ended up dying without graduating. I imagined that in the event that those children didn't understand that they were dead, they would surely end up repeating their usual behaviors. I imagined that they would continue going to elementary school as if nothing had happened. That was how I acted. Every day, I would lie down in front of the station. I would merely repeat the same actions in the same place – and eventually I realized the meaninglessness of my actions. And at some point, the line of my feelings would be cut off. Unable to be recognized by anyone would eventually lead to the thread of my soul being cut off. From there on was a world I couldn't peek at, but…however, it felt that the moment beings like ourselves with only our hearts get completely painted in pitch black – is the moment we transform into something. That was what I feared above all else. I was afraid of the moment my heart would be crushed.

"…I'm going."

But M, who stopped in her tracks the same time as me, eventually took one step forward.

"Kii-chan… is my friend."

Her voice shook as she whispered that, as if trying to persuade herself. With her light aimed at the stairs, she slowly began to walk, and I had no choice but to follow.

When we arrived at the stairs, M aimed her light in all four cardinal directions. It's obvious to say it, but there was no one there. The sound of footsteps couldn't clearly be heard—but it seemed M had noticed it. She suddenly looked up with her well-shaped chin at the floor above.

Upstairs. The second floor.

Something… was walking.

I gulped. Goosebumps ran all over my body with a feeling that embodied rejection.

“…Let’s go.”

Saying that, M tightly squeezed the stuffed frog, and placed one foot on the stairs.

If I recalled correctly, the second floor was supposed to have classrooms for the second and third-year students. Whatever the case, there wasn’t supposed to be anybody there at this hour. If there was anyone, then it might have been one of the janitors – and if it was one of the janitors, then they should have had a light. There was no way they would be walking around blending into this pitch-black darkness.

My feet were completely frozen in their tracks, but M made her way up the stairs step by step.

As if encouraged by the squeaky sound of her sneakers, I also managed to move my legs somehow.

When I reached the second-floor corridor, I found M standing in the dark corridor aiming her light ahead, her feet stopped in place.

It felt as if the darkness had thickened even further. No, it appeared that the darkness itself had transformed into something alien.

--In the first place, did things like ghosts even exist?

That question suddenly appeared in my mind. Not setting aside my own existence, if I was weak signals merely peering back into stored data of the past – then I wonder if there are ghosts wandering around in this world as a mass of resentment?

“…Kii-chan?”

Once more, M's trembling, whispering voice echoed through the school building at night.

“It’s me… I’m coming to you now.”

She eventually muttered as if she had made up her mind and moved her feet forward. The corridor we were in was separated from the classrooms by a glass window and a sliding door. She opened the sliding doors, peered into the classrooms one-by-one, and called out. However, all of the classrooms were merely dark, with no hint of anyone inside.

After peering into several classrooms, we arrived at the last remaining classroom at the end of the second floor. M was about to place her hands on the sliding door – when it suddenly felt as if something was fluttering beyond the glass window. With a jump, I placed my hand on M’s shoulder, as if to tell her to stop. As expected, it slipped through – however, it seemed my intention was somehow conveyed through to her as a premonition.

“…”

With her pale hand placed on the handle of the sliding door, M stopped her movements.

She pursed her well-shaped lips together, and her throat moved stiffly.

Thereafter, she spoke in a silent whisper.

“…This classroom… it feels like there’s something horrible inside.”

I nodded vigorously in response to those words.

I saw a bead of sweat appear on M’s forehead.

“It’s just a thought, but…”

…Ahh.

“…Since I’m getting a horrible feeling – then I think it’s probably not Kii-chan who’s inside.”

…Eh?

“If it was Kii-chan, she definitely wouldn’t hate me.”

--Ah, that’s right. Humans can have a hunch on those sorts of emotions about their fellow humans. The feeling when the other party seems to hate them, or when the atmosphere is awkward. And a ghost is the very same human that’s merely invisible, and because the other party hates you when they do -- then in this world where the visibility is hazy, it might be possible for sensitive people to understand such things.

“Let’s… not go in here.”

The moment M whispered that.

The sound of a piano reverberated from somewhere.

M stopped in her tracks, and without thinking, I ended up hiding behind her, bringing great shame to myself. The two of us were frozen in place, unable to move, when I felt something flutter again at the edge of my vision.

“There’s a music room on the third floor.”

When I came to my senses at the sound of M's voice, she was already walking away.

“Kii-chan was learning to play the piano. And she was good at singing as well.”

In a panic, I ran after her.

“She might be trying to tell me that it’s this way.”

M said that… but I realized the same thing in a completely different way.

The fluttering thing at the edge of my vision from before – wasn’t it a hand? Countless white hands were floating in the air, driving us away by saying, ‘this isn’t it’, ‘not this way’.

I was chasing after M's back, but I couldn't help but be concerned about what was behind me. I could feel countless gazes pressing

down on my back. If I were to look back now, I couldn't help but feel I would see countless faces drawn close together gazing at me from the other side of that classroom's glass window. There was a luring temptation, as if a tenacious hand was grasping my hair and trying to get me to turn around.

As I clung to M's back as we went up the stairs – I was unable to regain my sense of equilibrium. It felt as if the floor, the world, was on a gentle slope.

When we arrived at the third floor, the darkness was something that couldn't be called darkness anymore.

Even though the light from the moon was pouring in through the windows of the corridor—the darkness was strong. As if it had turned into the black of the deep sea, with the presence of countless abnormalities contained within. However, as if cutting through the darkness, M aimed her light. Whispering "Kii-chan" in a low voice, she moved ahead step by step. She didn't bother looking into each class anymore. Her gaze was fixed at the end of the corridor, to the music room located at the far end of the school building.

I was already cowering, following M right behind her as if gripping her clothes. I had none of the composure necessary to bravely stand by her side. I hated this place to the point where I would have run away a long time ago if I was alone. Without a doubt, there was something up ahead.

Eventually, standing in front of the music room door, M took a deep breath.

And then – without hesitation, she creaked the door open. At that moment – it might have been a phantom smell, not a phantom limb, I felt a putrid odor hanging in the air. The music room was surrounded by a soundproof wall, and a double-glazed window. Beethoven, Liszt, Bach, Mahler, Mozart. The walls were decorated with portraits of musicians who were no longer alive. There was a black grand piano in the center of the room, it glittered in the reflection of M's aimed light.

"…Kii-chan?"

Something answered M's call.

In the darkness, it felt as if a deep hole had opened.

"…Kii-chan? It's you, isn't it…?"

M called out, but pathetically, I couldn't look anymore.

However, I felt it at the edge of my vision. Someone's gaze in the dense, spacious darkness.

"Kii-chan… There you are."

M's voice turned into a sob.

"…I'm sorry. I'm so sorry… I couldn't do anything…"

No one answered those words. Only a lukewarm presence enshrouded us as if in the depths of a swamp.

I took a deep breath, and fixed my gaze in front of me. I could see someone floating next to the piano. I made eye contact with the thing that floated there. And then, faced with that dark hole in the air, I realized.

--This is… me.

It was the same vacant expression I had as I lay there in front of the

station after realizing I had died. I grit my teeth once more after seeing how sad and transient a ghost is – in front of a gaze that had given up on everything and despaired of everything. It was enough to bring even me, devoid of emotion as I was, to the point of tears. The gaze that seemed to be looking our way, and yet, was not. To be unable to influence this world in any way. To be in constant pain, and yet, to not be offered help by anyone. And what was worse: to be feared, shunned, and kept away from.

When I was alive – I feel I feared death for a long, long time.

At the same time, I felt fear at the existence that roamed this world even after death.

But now that I'm finally dead, it's more anticlimactic than I imagined. The scenery I view is the same as when I was alive. My thoughts and my behavioral patterns have more or less stayed the same. Even ghosts are scared of scary things, and the things that made me happy are still the same. However, the absolute thing that clings to them is the incomparable sense of loneliness. Fear, happiness, sadness – all of these feelings cannot be shared with anyone else.

"They desperately seek meaning."

The words I had once heard somewhere from someone came to mind.

I still couldn't recall who that was, but it was probably the truth. If God really does exist, why did he create a system like this? Wouldn't it have been far better, to end everything once someone had died—

That's right, as I thought to myself as I scratched my hair, it happened.

I suddenly felt something in the depths of the sad gaze that looked my way. It felt as if that vacant gaze which seemed to have given up on everything, still had a faint wish that remained. It seemed she had something she wanted to convey to us – no, to M?

--What is it? Is there something… you want to say?

After having given up on everything, what is your wish? Do you want to die properly? Or are you trying to say farewell to M, your best

friend in life?

No…

No, it was different.

It was, something else. Kii-chan has given up on living and dying properly, but that was not what she was giving up on now.

“…Kii-chan, you must have been so scared all alone.”

M was sobbing in tears, as she painfully pieced together the words.

“I noticed it but didn’t say anything….no… I noticed it, but thought that such a thing wasn’t possible…I’m so sorry…”

In response to her words, it felt as if her sluggish eyes opened ever so slightly. A voice echoed in my head, as if it were a noise, as if it were a Buddhist prayer.

“…I’m sorry…I’m sorry, Kii-chan…I don’t know what you want to say to me.”

However, M asked, as if shouting.

“Why, did you die? Why… did you go to the pool alone? Were you really the Kii-chan I knew before you died?”

M cried out as something that could hardly be called a rumbling sound filled the music room.

“Who was that thing inside Kii-chan?”

--That was it.

That was the thing I, the old detective guy, and possibly that bastard Sako wanted to ask.

And if the one who ‘used to be Kii-chan’, who was here now could still talk – if she could somehow convey to M through her words. Then the words she would tell us would surely lead us on a path which would go somewhere. But – why was it I wonder? I didn’t

know if listening to that was the right thing to do. Hearing the words ‘Takamura’ being spoken would bring me hopeless despair.

However—

“…Eh?”

In the tense atmosphere, M looked up.

“…Yo….ishi?”

…….

“Was that the person inside Kii-chan? Who… is Yoishi?”

Yoishi--- Yoishi?[9]

Why… did the mere mention of the word… make me remember the kanji?

That was because… I knew it.

That’s right, I certainly knew that name.

It was a name very close to me – a name that should have been familiar to me as that of family.

Case 00 – Chapter 4: The Disturbing Mansion

“Yayyyyyyyy! I’m so glad we came here!”

A’s bright and effervescent words filled the car with smiles.

I remember reading a novel once when I was alive that started with the words, ‘After the tunnel, there was something like—', but after passing through a high-speed tunnel, the landscape was transformed into a beautiful undulating scenery of green ridgelines.

“See, isn’t it just like mama said?”

The mother, sitting in the passenger seat, was busily alternating between the view and the family in the car.

“There’s a lake nearby, an art museum, and a great restaurant opened by a famous chef, so I hear it's a hot tourist spot these days. Ahh, it’s so nice, I want to live someplace like this one day.”

“At any rate, three days in a cottage with a view of the lakeside? Not bad at all.”

The father smiled as he operated the steering wheel. The sky was clear without a cloud in sight, and although the summer sun glared down, the air was somewhat refreshing and absent of humidity, perhaps because it was a mountainous region.

It was the morning after we went to the elementary school at night.

M and her family used the occasion of the father’s Bon holiday to head to Y prefecture by car. M and I had fallen into a deep slumber after our late-night adventure, when we were roused out of bed by the happily excited mother. It seemed the family were going to rent a

cottage owned by one of her tennis friends and would stay there for three days starting from today.

“That’s so true— Staying in that town was making my imagination run wild.”

A spoke from the back seat sitting next to M.

“I mean it’s summer vacation after all, it might be better to just forget everything for once and take in some fresh air. Right, M?”

Realizing that A’s words were directed at her, M nodded slightly. Even as she lovingly caressed Leon’s head who was sitting on her lap, she looked lonesome and unwell with her eyes cast downwards.

I gently looked up at M’s beautiful face from within the stuffed frog.

It seemed M’s parents had decided to go on this trip because they were worried about M being in low spirits after Kii-chan’s mysterious death – but I alone was already under pressure to the point of being crushed. There were only two days left until the deadline of July 31st. Did that mean that something would happen on this three-day trip? Was the cottage we were headed towards the stage for ‘The Mansion Hanging Massacre Case’ that Takamura mentioned?

I couldn’t help but be worried about that. I was worried about being so far away from Tokyo where Sako and the old man were, and if something were to happen, I had no idea how I would contact them.

And on top of all that--

Everything was back to square one. That was because of the word ‘Yoishi’ that M had whispered at the elementary school in the dead of night. Did that mean that the ‘migrating malice’ wasn’t referring to Takamura? Was ‘Yoishi’ the thing inside Kii-chan just before her death, was it the thing the old detective was searching for? Just what was ‘Yoishi’, and why did the kanji for ‘Yoishi’ suddenly appear in my mind? And -- the biggest problem of all -- why did that name elicit a wave of nostalgic emotions within me? Why did it remind me of someone’s miserable face?

As I kept thinking on and on in circles about such things—

“I guess this is it?”

The father declared out loud as he made a sharp turn with the steering wheel. The body of the car swerved, and the M family’s foreign made SUV entered the unpaved road. The car was shaking on the bumpy, bare dirt road as it continued on its way along the dark mountain road.

“What a great road… I’m glad we have a four-wheel drive. But, can we trust this navigational guide?”

“No problem at all.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine.”

As the father knit his brows, A and the mother replied with a carefree smile.

However, as the car drove on, the cluster of trees grew even thicker, and the surroundings became dense with trees.

--If it was like this and something were to happen here, wouldn’t it be impossible for somebody to come and help?

I was getting worked up inside the stuffed frog, when eventually, a single western style building became visible beyond the trees up ahead.

“Wooooooooooow! That one, right? Hey, isn’t it that one?”

“That’s right, I’m sure it is! It’s so wonderful!”

Rather than a cottage, it would have been better to call the building an extravagant Western-style house. There was a porch at the entrance, a garden, and there were beautiful trees that were occasionally tended to by someone. But unfortunately, its outward appearance was far too archaic. To me, it looked like a Gothic haunted house.

After passing through an open iron gatepost, the car slowly came to a halt inside the premises.

The family who got out of the car seemed to have decided to take a family photograph before even unloading their luggage.

With a view overlooking the lake shore in the background, the father and mother stood in front of their two daughters. And it seems the composition was decided with Leo being furthest in front-- but then they suddenly stopped. It seemed they forgot the tripod, which meant that there was no one to press the shutter. I really wanted to help, but there was nothing I could do about it.

“Oh darn. What should we do?”

The moment A was about to turn to her father.

“Shall I take it for you?”

I looked back with my mouth agape at hearing that playful, familiar voice.

“You must be Hanamura-sama. You’ve come from quite far away, welcome. I’m Takita from Maruei real estate. I’m managing this vacation home.”

The person who greeted them in an aloof manner – was Sako Takita. His long, disheveled hair was neatly combed down, and he was dressed in a shabby grey suit with a matching tie. He wasn’t even trying to hide his innate shady nature that he exuded, but he hadn’t done so much that he didn’t look like a real estate manager in the countryside.

“Ah, of course. Much obliged.”

The father greeted him, and then handed Sako the antique polaroid camera he held in his hand. A and the mother both bowed their heads, “Thanks for helping us out,” “We’re really grateful,” as M silently greeted him in the end, Sako raised his voice happily.

“Ohh, isn’t this an SX-70? It sure was famous in the good old days.”

“It’s a camera my father used, and I’m still maintaining it and using it.”

“That’s a nice hobby. It’s far better than those digital cameras that are all the rage these days. Alright, let’s take the picture. Say, cheese – Ah, what nice smiles!”

Ka-chink.

After the photograph was taken, A and the mother took the camera from Sako, and flapped the exposure film that came out. After checking the family portrait that eventually became visible, they squealed and smiled at each other. I had a lot of questions I wanted to ask Sako, but he ended up starting a conversation with the father, so I looked at M for some reason. With the leash to Leo’s collar in hand, she was alone, gazing at the lake in a daze. As I looked at her small back, A’s frolicking voice drew close, “I knew I should have worn a white dress after all!”

“Look, M. The picture’s ready.”

I thought the blue one-piece suited her as well – as I looked at A, I somehow managed to get a peek at the family photograph she held out at the same time as M.

A small shiver ran through my back.

…Huh?

The things projected in the photograph were the lake, the grove, the sunlight, the father, the mother, A and M, and Leo.

There was something strange about the mundane family photo taken on the trip. Everyone was smiling and the scene was supposed to be peaceful, but, how should I say, something impossible was projected in the photo.

“Let’s put this up in the living room.”

But A immediately put the picture away, and I couldn’t check it properly.

While I was feeling hazy, I heard Sako’s relaxed voice.

“Ah, this really is a nice place. At dawn the scenery is tranquil and

wonderful, but at dusk it's especially magnificent. You get an unbroken view of the setting sun dyeing everything in its path. It will surely make you forget the hustle and bustle of the city and wash away the fatigue of everyday life."

Sako gestured extravagantly, with his hands outstretched as he explained, causing A and her mother to become more and more excited, "Wow!"

"However, there is one thing."

Thereupon, Sako glimpsed my way, and lowered his tone.

"There's a small story about this mountain."

"…What?"

"Well, it's one of the stories from the countryside you see – The story goes that something unpleasant has resided in this mountain since times immemorial, it's been called 'Gandame' or 'Yousenbou', or some other name of unknown origin, but well, it's from the legends of 'mountain goddess'[10]. The so called yōkai which would kill you if you laughed at it. That's the reason why no one lives in such a beautiful place like this, and why the owner rarely ever visits."

Sako spoke with a friendly grin to the father, who gave him a dubious look.

"To stay in a mansion like this with just your family for several days, I really can't recommend it you see."

"Just who are you?"

The one who broke into the conversation was the mother.

"Why would you tell us such creepy things when we came here to have a good time?"

"No, no, my apologies. Well, it's just a legend. We don't even know what the thing is. I apologize if I caused you any worry."

"You've done enough. Please just hand over the key. We already

brought food, drinks, and everything with us!”

She held out her hand in anger as if to shoo Sako away. Sako shrugged and handed over the key to the mansion.

“There is a telephone inside. But there’s no Internet. The cell reception is poor. The water comes from the well, so please leave the faucet open first until it becomes clear. Ah, and moreover…”

“Yes, you’ve said enough!”

This time, A said that, and she then turned to M and the mother, “Let’s take out the luggage.”

(--Hey, where have you been all this time?!)

As soon as the family had entered inside, I slipped out of the stuffed frog and shouted at Sako.

He couldn’t hear me of course, but it seemed my menacing attitude really got through to him.

“Hey, long time no see. Now, now, it’s not something to be so angry about.”

“Long time? Are you kidding me?! There’s a shit ton of things I want to ask and tell you, but first of all, why the hell are you the manager in a place like this?”

“…Hm? Ah, my appearance? Why, I merely pulled some strings with an acquaintance of mine. I slipped into the company managing this real estate. I wanted to investigate this place.”

--This place? You wanted to investigate it? Why was that?

In reply, Sako looked around as he muttered in a deep breath, “This place is the worst.”

“Geographically speaking, It’s located in the northeast[11], and there must have been a small shrine here in the past where something was

sealed. For that reason, it seems it was rebuilt a little way further down when this vacation home was built. No matter how suitable of a location it must have been for viewing the lakeside, they should have paid a little respect to its former inhabitants."

Saying that much, Sako began walking without even looking my way.

(…Hey, wait. Wait a second.)

"Please come. Let us talk along the way."

Having no choice, I drifted after Sako.

Sako pushed through to the forest after slipping through the thicket of trees.

The road, which was about a meter wide at first, quickly turned into a grassy slope which could hardly be described as a game trail. However, Sako slipped through the thick cluster of trees, and continued descending the gentle slope. The high-pitched call of a creepy mountain bird reverberated from somewhere, and it was pretty dark despite it being daytime.

(…Hey, how much farther is it?)

After the many times I threw him that question–

The view suddenly opened up.

It was a space spread out around ten meters in all four directions, and in the center was an old shrine slanting to its side.

You could call it tranquil with the way it was illuminated by the sunlight pouring in through the trees, but if you were to say that something was there, it was also suitably eerie. As Sako drew closer to the shrine, he pulled and tossed the grass aside that grew around it. He peeked inside, and sighed.

"Aah, is this fate? –No, is it an ill fate? I had a bad feeling about it, but it seems this rebuilt shrine is indeed similar to that of an Inari shrine."

It was a dilapidated old shrine that looked like it must have been built around a hundred years ago. It had turned black and discolored, with its Shimenawa rope about to come off. It was merely dark beyond the lattice window, and I couldn't clearly see what deity was enshrined within – frankly speaking, it was creepy.

Sako used a handkerchief to wipe away the dust off the offering pedestal, took out a portable whiskey container from his jacket pocket and then poured some kind of transparent liquid into a chipped flat plate that was there. He then bowed twice, clasped his hands together twice, then bowed once more[12]. I too hurriedly put my hands together behind Sako.

…Um, Wait, it's not the time for that. After I finished bowing, I looked once more at Sako.

(Hey, there's only two days left. And M's family plans on staying here for the next three days. In short, we don't have time. Isn't that mansion dangerous? Won't it become the stage of a family massacre?)

"You seem quite perturbed."

After Sako finished his long bow, he smiled slightly.

"Judging from the air... I'm guessing there's not much time left."

(Yes, that's right, that's exactly it. I don't remember it exactly, but didn't something like this happen in a foreign movie? Didn't a crazy murderer wearing a ski mask appear in a lodge in the mountains? Hey, I'm begging you, make a move! Do something!"

I begged him desperately, when Sako suddenly looked in a different direction.

"--W, the person who's there, please come out."

Startled, I looked in the direction of the grove where he spoke, and from the bushes, a man slowly appeared.

And I was flabbergasted once more. The man who appeared there was the old detective who talked to M about the 'migrating malice'. The old man named Tatsuya if recalled correctly glared at Sako with

a suspicious look on his face as he drew closer step by step crossing over the grass.

--W, why are you here, too?

In reply, the old man interrogated Sako in a menacing tone of voice.

"Hey, you. Who have you been talking to? Who are you?"

"I'm the manager of a real estate company, I'm in charge of that villa. And as for who I was talking with -- well, you could call it my guardian spirit. I don't mind it at all if you don't believe me."

"Manager? Guardian spirit?"

‘Liar’, said the old man as he drew close to Sako.

"Who are you really? What real estate manager in this world talks with ghosts in front of old shrines?"

Sako gave a broad grin in response, took his business card out of his pocket, and handed it out to him.

“Chief Priest of Okitachi Inari Shrine… Sako, Takita? You’re a chief priest? …Ah, could it be you? The guy loitering around the Nagami household the day after the incident?”

“That’s right. Then, who might you be? Why are you here?”

This time, the old man pulled out a black identification card from his breast pocket in response to Sako’s question.

“Oh--? Police?”

“That’s right. I followed that family here.”

I had been watching the conversation unfold between the two up till now, but--

---Ohhhhh, I opened my mouth wide. Finally, finally, at last, I flapped my arms and legs and shouted with the excitement of a showman who managed to get all the actors ready in place ten minutes before

the performance began.

(Hey, Sako! This old man is on our side! He's someone who's seen the thing we're after! We need to work together with him and save that family somehow!)

"…Hm."

Sako glanced at me, and groaned.

"What's wrong?"

"No…Ah, that's right. The reason you're giving off such joyful vibrations is because – you believe this meeting will help that family. In short, the thing we're chasing after is the same, is it?"

"What did you say?"

"No, no, I wasn't talking to you, my pseudo guardian spirit is a little impatient you see."

I was ticked off at being called a pseudo guardian spirit, but there was no time to brood over it. At any rate, I nodded my head frantically.

"Wait a minute. You, you can see them? Do things like ghosts really exist?"

"Well, those sorts of conversations usually aren't very productive – so I won't assert it here. For the time being, it seems it would be best for you and me to join forces. But first, we need to understand each other's objectives and share an understanding of the current situation. Why are you following that family? The police can't possibly believe someone in that family is involved with the incidents that occurred in K and S town?"

The old man gave a bitter face in response.

"Sadly, not at all. But that's just because the police organization doesn't think so, and that's not my opinion."

"Oh?"

“The shrine in S town, the Nagami household in K town, and the girl in the elementary school who drowned in the pool the other day – I felt ‘its’ presence in all of them.

“’Its’?”

Ignoring Sako’s question, the old man continued to speak.

“The news reports merely stated that she was submerged at the bottom of the pool, but Kie Kosaki-chan a.k.a ‘Kii-chan’ had a smile on her face with her eyes open when she died. The way she was submerged in the water was also strange. She was lying on her back with her hands clasped over her stomach, as if to see how far her body would go before it died. That wasn’t a murder or an accident. It was the bizarre scene of something much more sinister. The scene of the crime ‘it’ is associated with always have that strange sense of unease.”

…Sense of unease.

I saw Sako’s lips distort at hearing those words.

“I’ve seen crime scenes like that so many times up until now. The scene of the crime was filled with a sense of unease. And like me, the child in that family can sense ‘its’ existence. There is an elementary school girl there, isn’t she?”

“Yes. There is.”

“That’s why, I’m watching over her. I have a feeling ‘it’ can’t ignore humans that can sense its presence. Maybe that's why it’s hanging around me - but at any rate, I have a bad feeling about it.”

…Hey, wait a second.

(Do you mean to say that the next person who will be killed is M? Is that what you’re saying?)

I unconsciously butted into their conversation, but of course, no one listened to me.

“From your manner of speaking, the ‘it’ you refer to does not seem to

be human. And it seems you have encountered ‘it’ in the past. Which is why you are not perturbed by my guardian spirit here.”

The old man then gazed my way with a look of disgust – and nodded.

“I don’t know what’s there, but… Ah… it’s definitely not the same. ‘It’ was not this carefree – or should I say, it didn’t have this idiotic air about it.”

“Oh, I completely agree.”

…Hey.

Even though I’m dead, you can't be an ‘idiot’ to someone you're meeting for the first time.

As I acted indignant by myself, Sako looked my way with a mischievous look on his face, and grinned.

“I see, maybe you're right. I think this detective and I should join forces.”

“So, do you know what ‘it’ is?”

When the detective asked, Sako suddenly nodded with a serious expression on his face.

“It goes by many names—but according to literature, it is commonly referred to as ‘Yoishi’.”

“…Yoishi?”

“Yoishi is written as night stone.[13]”

My heart throbbed at the appearance of that word once more. It was an ill-boding shock due to having guessed ‘Yoishi’s’ writing correctly.

“The origin of the word can be traced back to the Edo period. It happened in the fourth year of the Kyōhō era, 1724 in Gregorian terms. In the estate of a shogunal vassal, a savage lord was said to have lived who had a hobby of manslaying. Night after night, it is said that he would try out blades on humans he had bought in front

of a stone in his garden. Countless innocent people were cut down just for the fun of it, and the stone that continued to be bathed in the blood splatter from the victims soon came to be known as the 'everlasting night stone'. It is said this was because it was dyed in the color of dark blood, as if it swallowed all light. Well, from this story alone, you might be led to believe that the stone itself ended up harboring a will due to the actions of that savage lord – however, was that really the case?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wasn't it the opposite? Is what I've come to think recently. In short, was the lord himself not the one possessed by this stone as he continued to cut down humans?"

The old man cocked his head in puzzlement, and in response:

"Have you heard the story of the pale faced, nine-tailed fox with the golden fur?"

Sako suddenly narrowed his eyes ominously and spoke.

"It was originally a great demon said to have crossed over from continental Asia in the Nara period – it transformed itself into a woman of unmatched beauty known as Tamamo-no-Mae and planned to take control of the country by seducing the emperor of the time. In the end, however, it was discovered by the diviner Abe Yasunori and chased down to Nasu where it was turned into a stone… in short, it's the story of the killing stone of Nasu in Tochigi prefecture.[14] "

"Yeah, I've heard of it."

"It is said that the 'nine-tails' continued to spew poison even after it was turned into stone, and killed anything that came near it. Even after a monk named Gennō Shinshō of the Soto school of Buddhism smashed the stone into pieces, it merely scattered in all directions. In short, nowhere does it say that it was exterminated."

…Hey, it can't be.

"That's right. If that 'everlasting night stone' was originally a fragment of that killing stone. Then contrary to the legend, the 'nine

tails' still exists in this world. Now we come to the fundamental problem at hand."

Thereupon, Sako twisted his lips somewhat amused.

"What actually was the 'nine tails'?"

"…What?"

"I don't need to bring out a copy of the classic of mountains and seas[15], a similar existence is inscribed since time immemorial in every country. It possesses humans, spouts poison, and kills those around it – just for the fun of it. It is called a 'demon' at times, and a 'witch' at others, and has been feared by the masses, however, where did this 'pure malice' come from in the first place? I'm really interested in that. I've sometimes thought that it was a piece of instinct that was somehow scraped off when the species known as humans arose in this world."

"…What a load of crap."

The old man spat, and glared at Sako.

"Scoundrels are not born by necessity or coincidence. They are simply weak. They just let their weak hearts get the better of them in the moment."

"Is that so?"

In response, Sako smiled again.

"It is my understanding, but 'it' has been involved with countless incidents. 'It' – or 'Yoishi', as it is now called – appears out of nowhere every few years and destroys people like a natural disaster. By destroy I mean quite literally: mentally and physically destroys them. Most people who associate with Yoishi will end up dead. And they will despair of this world, bear grudges, spread their hopeless delusions, and be thrust down into the endless corridor without

salivation – Ahh, this is neither a lie, a ghost story, or a fairy tale. It might be rude to mention it in front of a member of the police like yourself, but this information is recorded in the records of the National Public Safety Commission, unofficially though it may be."

"…What did you say?"

"This country has long been disgraced with the title of a 'suicide superpower', but the reality is different. If I were to give a brief overview of the recent incidents I'm aware of in which 'Yoishi' was involved: It thoroughly destroyed seventeen people in Tokyo three years ago before it disappeared. Before that, it was eight people in Kōchi city, and nineteen people in Kitakyushu – well, there's no end to it really. At any rate, if we were to say that it's been destroying people since the Heian period (794-1192), then you can only guess the number of victims. So, why is such an existence, which is unofficially recognized by the Public Safety Commission, left unchecked? That question is quite reasonable, but the answer simply is that they can't do anything. The level of research into the beings known as 'spirits' in this country is extremely, extremely low. The budget can't be used for things that can't be seen by the naked eye. No matter how many people die or suffer, all of it is treated as 'suicide' and 'natural disasters."

'However', Sako spoke as he narrowed his eyes and transformed from the blasé persona he had up until now.

"I alone refuse to accept it as something like a 'natural disaster'."

……..

"I want to seal it somehow. No – I want it to suffer so much that it curses itself for being born in this world and messing around with humans, and then I want to tear it into pieces and obliterate it."

His narrow, distorted eyes were blank. He turned them in my direction and spoke.

"Hey, you. The one I can't see for some reason. I don't know the reason why you are staying at that family's house, and I don't really care at this point. However, I can say with certainty that you are

somehow connected to that thing. And moreover, you're connected strongly. I'm sure that's the reason why you're here."

The old man waved his hand as if to ward off something and looked at Sako with a disgusted expression since he abruptly began to converse with me who was invisible to everyone else.

"Be it ghosts or witches or monstrous foxes – I don't know about any of that. And I can't comprehend it either. However, 'it' exists, doesn't it? I'm not strange in the head or anything, right?"

"That's right."

"And can you do something about it?"

"Who knows, I'm not sure what I can do-- but at any rate, it seems our goals and our awareness of the current situation align."

Sako grinned, and looked back at the road we came from – or rather, the mansion located about a kilometer up the road from here.

Realizing what lay at the end of his gaze, my heart filled up with something black.

(...Hey... wait a minute...)

The 'migrating malice' the old man was searching for was called 'absolute evil'. And the 'certain ghost' Sako was after for many years was the 'nine tails', and if it was called 'Yoishi' now...

(Hey... Could the 'true culprit' that assaults M's family from here on be...?)

'That's right', Sako declared without a change in his expression as he thrust his hands in his pockets.

"In all likelihood, 'Yoishi' is present inside someone in that family."

○

In the pitch-black summer night –

The garden of the mansion was filled with the sound of crackling firewood and frolicking voices.

It seemed that a barbecue was to be held in the garden that evening. Meat, green peppers, onions, and other things were roasting deliciously on top of the camping cookware. The mother and A were dividing the grilled food one after another onto paper plates for the father and M. At the same time, they were taking a bite themselves and jumping up and down saying, "It’s so delicious".

The father dived deep back into his folding chair, drinking a beer, while M blew on her food to cool it down before feeding Leo a piece of chicken cut into small pieces. A small light illuminated the surroundings which was connected by a long extension cord all the way from the mansion, creating a lively atmosphere enough to make you forget that you were in the middle of the forest.

I sat alone at the edge of the porch gazing at the scene in a daze.

--What should I do from here on?

'Takamura' was not the 'true culprit' of the incident to come. It was 'Yoishi', something different. And if Takamura's prediction were to come to pass, then in a day and a half, something would happen to the family. Sako had said that 'Yoishi' was inside someone in the family.

However -- even after hearing that, I still wanted to believe in a different possibility.

Even if the 'lump of malice’ known as 'Yoishi' existed in this world -- then it might not be possessing someone in this family, but might visit this family while possessing someone else. If that were the case, then as long as the mansion stayed locked up tight, it would somehow turn out alright. The old man and Sako were both outside, and if someone suspicious tried to do something dangerous, then they

would deal with that.

However-- If 'Yoishi' was already present inside someone in this family.

That would mean it had already infiltrated inside the mansion, and not just that, if the plan to come to the mansion itself was its suggestion, then the possibility that it was a part of its plan all along couldn't be discounted.

I thought to myself as I looked at the figures of the family under the light.

No matter how many times I counted them, there were only four people present: the father, the mother, M and A.

I thought about who it was that 'Yoishi' might be lurking inside. My first thought was that it couldn't have been M. I had been together with her all this time, so I knew somehow. She didn't seem well right now, but I never got the impression from M that she had changed. M was still M, just unwell. And that was because of the incident with Kii-chan. However, if that were the case, then the remaining possibilities would be the father, the mother, or could it be her sister A? No... I couldn't feel anything different in their moods than before. There were no major changes in my impression of them since I first met them.

In the first place, who was the one who suggested this trip? I was with M the whole time, and the first time I came to know of it was when the father let us know, "We're going on a trip tomorrow". I was puzzled, and I guess M was too. When we went down to the living room, A and her mother were already frolicking happily. If I recall correctly, this cottage itself was said to have belonged to one of the mother's acquaintances, but to assert that it was the mother because of that would be a weak argument.

--Ah, dammit. I don't know.

Sako disappeared somewhere after that, saying he would come after he had cleansed himself, and the old detective also disappeared saying he would be on standby in his car parked in the grove of trees

nearby. The two of them exchanged phone numbers, but the signals were weak in this mountain, and I was worried that they might not be able to work together to deal with the situation. But whatever the case may be, we had no choice but to believe in Takamura's deadline after having come this far. The 31st of July -- that is, the day after tomorrow -- I had to find out who the 'migrating malice' known as 'Yoishi' was inside of, and I had to convey that to Sako and the old man.

And one more thing.

I looked up at the night sky in a daze, and recalled the word once more.

Why was it that I recalled someone's lonely looking face when I muttered the word 'Yoishi'?

'Demon', 'Nine tails', 'Absolute evil', 'monster'. The name 'Yoishi' associated with those things somehow doesn't seem so terrifying to me. The unrelenting flow of emotions within me were saying things like, "A pain in the ass", "Making a mess even messier", "A friend I just couldn't ignore". Like a family member I had lived with for many years – or rather, something deeper, more intimate, more connected.

I gazed once more at the scene illuminated by the halogen lights and the flickering flames of the barbecue.

All I could see was an average peaceful family. A family filled with the love that was essential for people to grow as human beings, where they cared for each other, where they knew they were important, and where they can be sure that they will love each other unconditionally.

The father was a man devoted entirely to his family. He was a man determined to be the headstrong wall that would protect his family from the strong and violent winds that would occasionally blow in from the outside world. The mother understood the father, trusted him, and strove hard to make the world inside the walls he protected bright and peaceful. Her careless comedic persona might have been half-way real, but there were times I couldn’t help but feel that it was all an act. A was a cheerful, if fidgety, older sister who would look

first to M whenever something happened. She was always concerned about her younger sister, and she was always willing to share the joy that happened to her.

--My only wish is to save this family.

I thought to myself.

--I wanted these people to lead happy lives.

The existence which was trying to destroy that for whatever reason was in the wrong.

Having brought fireworks, M and her family raised their voices with joy.

M was smiling after a long time. As I gazed at her smile, I felt something seeping from the back of my eyes.

You could smile after all, couldn’t you? I heard such a voice from inside me. You could smile with such a kind face, couldn’t you? You could even make such a cute face, couldn't you?

...Ahh, why was it I wonder?

Tears flowed copiously from both my eyes without stopping.

…I wish you could smile like that forever and ever.

I whispered to M, who was gazing at the sparklers with her hair tucked behind her ear.

○

After the fireworks finished, everyone began to clean up, and the family returned to the mansion.

From here, it seemed they would take turns taking a bath, and relax

individually.

Incidentally, the ground floor had a hearth in the living room about 32 sqm in width, and there was a television and a sofa there. In the back was an attached kitchen about 6.5 sqm in size, the toilet, bath, and the storeroom were located at the end of the corridor on the first floor. The second floor had three bedrooms, all of the same make. There were two beds, a closet, and a bedside table. That was all. One of those rooms was used by the mother and father, while M and A stayed in another.

Having been away from the stuffed frog after a long time, I was also a little tired, so I returned to the stuffed frog for a brief respite and was in a daze.

It was after the father had taken the first bath. M was taking some of her luggage out in the second-floor bedroom, when A asked her if she wanted to take a bath together.

"…A bath?"

After thinking over it for a while, M shook her pale face, and said she would go alone.

I thought it was strange for M, who would never decline an invitation,

"Really? Well, go ahead of me then, I'll be tidying up with mama."

A said that and left.

M quickly began to take out pajamas and towels from her bag. And then she suddenly grabbed me-- the stuffed frog and picked me up.

...Huh?

"Will you take a bath with me?"

M picked me up and took me with her as she trudged down the stairs towards the bathroom.

--Hey, hey, wait a minute. Even though she might only be an

elementary schooler, isn't it a bad idea to share a bath with her. No, elementary schoolers are a focus of controversy in the present age, so that's surely not good, right?

In hindsight, I realized I could have refrained simply by slipping out of the stuffed frog, but I was disturbed in the head at the time.

Even as I flailed around, we soon arrived in the bathroom, and I was neatly placed beside a basket in the dressing room.

As M swiftly began to undress in front of my very eyes, I became flustered and focused my gaze on a stain in the ceiling.

Eventually, an undressed M grabbed me and a towel before entering the washing place. It was a space big enough for all four of the family members to fit in, and it was filled with warm steam.

She sat me down in front of the washing place's mirror, and poured hot water on her body in front of my eyes.

I didn't know where I should focus my gaze anymore.

"…You know, Mr. Frog."

M spoke as she bathed her shoulders with hot water and lathered her towel with body soap.

"There's something I must talk to you about. That day, I was told…. No, maybe I had a feeling I was told? I didn't understand it well."

--Ah… was she talking about what happened in the elementary school late at night?

At that moment, M certainly spoke the words, 'Yoishi' and asked, 'Who is Yoishi?', which meant that it was a word conveyed to her by the thing that was Kii-chan, but was there some other word she was told – something she didn't say out loud?

"Um, I don't really understand what the word 'Yoishi' meant. But there was another word Kii-chan said… I wanted someone to hear it. It's… painful to stay silent."

--Ah, was that the reason why she was in low spirits recently?

However, having spoken that far, M couldn't manage to continue speaking.

After she finished washing her body, she tied her long, beautiful hair up and entered the bathtub with me in her arms.

She immersed herself in the hot water all the way up to her lips, then elevated me up in front of her, and gazed at me with her big eyes.

"I don't know if it was Kii-chan that night in the elementary school. I didn't see her clearly… but, that kind of thing happens with me sometimes. There are times when I feel like there's something there, something like a black shadow, black in color. In the corner of the wall, or behind the television, or beyond a slightly open door… something dark, lumpy, and fuzzy. But papa and the others can't see it. Even though it's so dark, I end up being told that there's nothing there. That dark spot is… nothing at all like a human, and yet, there are times when I can't help but feel that it is something human. I look away because I'm scared, but it's like it knows I've noticed it… and it keeps looking at me. And there have been times when it follows me."

--That was...

That was me… she was talking about. When I first met M in the city, she certainly stared at me. But at the time, I was merely seen as something dark. I– I mistakenly thought she had recognized me and got so happily carried away that I ended up chasing her around.

I hung my head down, full of remorse.

In response, M spoke as she looked at me, "But you know…"

"I can sometimes sense it with you, too, Mr. Frog."

…Eh?

M wiped the rim of her eyes with a small finger and smiled a little.

"Sometimes when I'm crying alone in my room, I can hear a voice

from somewhere, saying, 'It's alright, it's alright'. One day, I realized that it might be Mr. Frog. Mr. Frog may be strange, but you're not scary. I can't explain it well, but I feel Mr. Frog isn't really Mr. Frog – but someone who's protecting me in the form of Mr. Frog. If something dangerous comes for me, it feels like Mr. Frog is planning to crash into it instead of me. I feel as if you've decided to die in my place."

The moment her words reached me---

Something like tears welled forth from within me, and I covered my face.

"…Even though Mr. Frog has such a carefree look on his face, but in truth you're really in pain about something, and you think that it will be easier if you die… but, I always thought that you're wrong. That's why, I have to be strong, because Mr. Frog will crash and die before me if something happens to me."

M slowly chose her words, and carefully tried to convey the things she had seen and felt up until now. Every time her words reached me, something intense burst out like magma, breaking through the cold ground of my emotions. I kneeled down, and all I could do was be thankful. I devotedly bowed my head, not knowing where I should lower myself for this fate.

At the same time, the knowledge filled my head like melting ice.

I remembered that there were ghost stories that revolved around dolls in this world – and a few of them which made you feel a faint sense of warmth. Like the one about a cherished plastic doll of a hero which would protect you if an evil spirit came. Or a doll you treasured because it seemed like a dead child, which would then warn you of a fire in your dream while you were asleep. They were like me, wandering faint beings without a destination that possessed something. They would become someone's treasured doll– and before realizing, fall under the delusion that they themselves were being treasured. And then, wouldn't they decide to devote themselves to protecting that person who treasured them?

I gave up on trying to wipe away the unending tears that were like a

lid lifted off my emotions, and I looked up. I looked straight at M, and decided I would take in everything she said.

"That's why, I slowly started to think that the dark shadow wasn't something to just be scared of – but I was still afraid."

Thereupon, M squinted her large eyes with a look as if she was crying and smiling.

"I often wished I didn't see or hear anything... but suddenly, I always ended up seeing them-- Ahh, that's right, there were times I would only hear something like words. I would hear a buzzing noise echo in my ear. I don't know what they're saying... but it happened again in the music room at school recently."

--Ahh, it's not the time for me to cry.

This was important. Hey, M. If there's something else you know that I don't, then tell me.

(Did you hear that? You don't have to suffer alone. There's someone besides me who will believe what you say. In the surroundings of this mansion, there's that bastard Sako who I don't quite trust, and even that old detective is there. They're all waiting nearby. So, tell me everything right from the start. What did you hear in that music room?)

Of course, I was sure not even a single one of my desperate words or phrases would reach her perfectly. It could be that they might have reached her as the buzzing noise she mentioned before. However, M desperately looked at me with her big eyes, and slowly began to speak as if recalling each word.

"I didn't know what it was at first, but that day in the music room, I heard the word 'M-chan' being spoken at times."

(Go on.)

"The way my name was called was really nostalgic...Ah, I thought it must have been Kii-chan. But after that, I hardly understood it at all. I don't know if she was trying to tell me the same thing, but I couldn't understand any of it... And then, I tried to ask her. I tried asking Kii-

chan what the thing inside of her was."

(That's right, I heard that as well.)

"After that, the only word I felt I heard was 'Yoishi'. The words Yoishi, Yoishi, Yoishi, Yoishi, kept continuing, and then it changed to a static noise like zazaza... But, but, after that..."

It seemed she ended up remembering something truly horrifying. Her small shoulders that had risen up from the hot water at some point, were submerged into the water once again, and M once again looked at me as if clinging to me."

(Hang in there. Tell me. Try speaking it.)

I desperately looked back at M's beautiful face as if praying, when—

"...Mother."

M spoke in a feeble voice that almost trailed off.

"Be careful... of mother...I think that's what she told me."

…….

"For a long time... I thought Kii-chan was talking about her own mother... And I didn't understand what she meant... I thought I might have misheard it, and I didn't tell anyone... But yesterday, I realized it."

My heart thumped with a jolt. Was it my invisible heart, or a phantom limb? I didn't know, but something was thumping inside me as if pulsating through my entire being.

"Hey, Mr. Frog... If... If she was talking about my mother -- What should I do?"

M's face turned pale as she managed to squeeze out the words with a

trembling voice.

"I'm scared of the thing that was inside Kii-chan. If something like that were to happen again, what should I do...? If that's inside mama, what should I do...?"

M must have reached the limits of her patience; large teardrops spilled down her eyes as she cried out.

Before I'd realized, I had slipped out of the stuffed frog, and placed my hand softly on M's small head.

I stroked her black hair slowly as if embracing her head, trying to share the fear and grief that she carried, however little I could.

"I'm scared... I'm so scared... Mr. Frog..."

I bit my lips, at a loss of how to respond to her feeble cries—when--

M suddenly raised her face and stared somewhere.

I, too, turned my head in that direction.

It was in the direction of the dressing room.

The shadow of a person was present beyond the frosted glass, someone had entered before I'd realized.

Someone slender and slanted stood there, and I saw it shift.

"...M."

That voice was--

"...Is it alright, if mama comes iiin?"

The strange intonation in the way she infected the end of that word made me shiver.

What -- did M's mother always talk so fawningly?

I heard Leo’s loud growls coming in from the hallway beyond the bathroom.

“I…I want to… take it by myself…today.”

M managed to reply as she tried to hide the trembling in her voice.

However, the voice on the other side of the glass spoke somewhat cheerfully.

“…What’s the matter? Isn’t it alright… if mama comes iiin?”

On the other side of the glass, A long, slender hand was placed on the bathroom door. The moment the door was about to be opened -- an inexplicable emotion exploded. An intense rage welled up inside me, a mass of uncontrolled emotions that made my hair stand on ends. Then, with a jerk, I slanted my body forward and raised my arms, and slammed my fist against the door with all the strength I could muster.

A fearsome noise roared through the bathroom. No, since I couldn't physically interact with anything in this world, it was quite possible that I might have imagined it. At the same time, "Grrrr", Leo's piercing grill echoed in from somewhere.

--Thereupon.

I turned around hearing a splashy water sound to see M standing stock still in the bathtub with a towel around her.

I turned to look at the focus of her gaze and realized.

Before I had noticed, the shadow behind the glass had disappeared.

○

That night, I didn't sleep a wink.

No, the thing resembling sleep rarely came to me, but that day my consciousness was clear all night long. I continued glaring at the door from inside Mr. Frog as if to protect A and M who were sleeping in

their beds in the bedroom.

--Only one day left until July 31st.

No, there were only about eighteen hours left now.

Kii-chan's last words to M were "Be careful of mother." And the shadow resembling her mother that appeared in the bathroom a few hours ago.

So… was it her mother? Was 'Yoishi' inside the mother right now? If that were the case, then shouldn't I do something about it right now and relay that information to Sako and the old man?

However – for some reason, I couldn't make up my mind to act right away.

How should I say…? Right, it was too straightforward.

An easy straight ball. Both Sako and the old man said that 'Yoishi' was not an idiot. I didn't know if the 'thing' they were chasing was 'Malice', 'Nine-tails' or a 'Monster', but they all shared the impression of being a 'lump of malice'. Would something like that really do something like easily reveal itself? But if that were the case, then was 'Yoishi' inside the father or the older sister?

--Dammit, I didn't know anymore.

As my thoughts spun over and over pondering on such things, it ended up becoming bright beyond the window. The chirping of the birds started ringing in the surroundings to the point of annoyance.

Eventually, as if drawn by those bird sounds, M stirred in her bed and sat up. She fixed her slightly disheveled long black hair with her hand, and then looked in my direction before whispering 'Good morning'.

I replied 'Good morning' back to her as cheerfully as I could.

The strong light from the summer sun poured in through the gap in the curtains, but it wasn't too hot because of the high altitude. It was an ordinary awakening to a beautiful and invigorating world.

But it felt like I, and for some reason, M as well, understood it.

Today, the warm light that wrapped everything would end, and something dark would begin–

M's eyes seemed to realize that fate had declared that today would be that day.

With five minutes left until 6 AM, M gently got out of bed so as not to wake her sister. She put on her gown and left the room while still wearing her pajamas. I was, of course, tucked into her pocket.

When she descended the stairs to the living room, her father was already awake and smiled when he saw M.

"Good morning, M. You sure are early today."

Her father too was still only in his pajamas and a cardigan; he was boiling water in the kitchen.

"Would you like to drink some tea?"

"Yes."

"Wait there."

M made her way to the sofa, and sat on the sofa with a thump, when her father asked the question.

"Say, M. Have you seen mama?"

M turned back, I too came out of the frog, and stood there.

It was hard to understand the meaning of that question.

"When I got up this morning, mama wasn't in bed. Did she go out for a walk?"

"Didn't you sleep together yesterday?"

"Mama and A seemed to be watching television, so I slept ahead of her. At some point late at night, mama entered the room and I think she went to bed, but maybe I was tired from the long drive here. I fell

asleep without waking up. …Well, I think she went on a walk. She's not the type to stay still. Let's try waiting a little more."

The father smiled with his sleepy-looking eyes.

M stayed silent, with a slightly anxious look on her face. She didn't mention what happened last night in the bath. No, if I was M, I couldn't do it either. Seeing how bright the surroundings had become after the night had passed, yesterday's events seemed to be nothing more than a dream. I mean in reality, all she was asked was if she could take a bath with her, although her voice was somewhat creepy when she spoke.

"Ahh—It smells so good!"

Thereupon, A came downstairs while stretching, she was also wearing pajamas and a gown. And her hair was beautifully disheveled.

"Honey herb tea for me as well--!"

Hearing that bright voice, the father smiled and offered her his own cup. He then called M over and handed her a teacup, and began brewing his own tea.

"Onee-chan, do you know where mama is?"

M asked with cup in hand, and A cocked her head in confusion.

"Papa says he hasn't seen her since he woke up."

"Eeeeh---? …Ah, she must have gone for a walk. I was also woken up by the birds singing. The weather looked so nice from the window and the lake was so pretty! Let's go after her after we finish our tea."

A suggested, as she blew on her teacup to cool it down a few degrees.

The father nodded as well, 'That's right'.

"Well then, can you two go by yourselves? Meanwhile, I'll make breakfast. The first thing mama will probably say when she gets back is--"

“Ahh, I'm starving!”

A instantly retorted, and the father laughed, ‘That’s exactly it’.

Next to the mansion’s front gate, there was a path leading to the lake.

A, M, along with me in the stuffed frog that slightly peeked out from M’s pocket, trotted down along the path. The morning mist still hung in the air, and the summer sun, which would get stronger from here on, felt nice in the clear air.

The sisters who had changed into their casual clothes laughed as they descended the gentle slope which was covered with grass; terraced fields must have been there in the past. A was the only one talking, but her successive jokes eventually made M laugh. That may have been in part due to this open space created by nature. The two sisters were hand in hand, descending the slope as if doing dance steps.

After walking through the grove of trees for about thirty minutes, the shore of a vast lake came into view.

The shore of the lake was a public park covered by grass, and people who looked like the town's senior citizens' association could be seen playing gateball early in the morning. The surface of the lake glittered with the reflection of the sunlight, and the mountain ridges were undeniably beautiful.

“We should have brought Leo with us.”

M said that, but A was looking around all over the place, and sighed in reply, “Mama isn’t here--”.

“Oh, look at that, M! I want to take a ride on that later!”

A pointed to a duck-shaped rowboat for two that you would often see at tourist spots on lakes.

“I wonder if it’s possible to go on a trip on that…”

“…Ehh?”

“We could squeeze food and drinks in there, and then we could go on a cruise by rowing with our feet. A grand adventure with as little equipment as possible! Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“…But, but what would we do if there’s a storm?”

“In that case we’ll cover ourselves with a sheet and ride it out. We might see whales or dolphins on the way. Birds might chase after us. Or maybe we’ll see something even more mysterious, something we’ve never seen before, an animal that nobody knows about! Yesss —It will be so much fun!”

M was in a daze, unsure of how to reply to A who had completely gone to a world of her own. As I looked at their exchange– I somehow observed A. A was the same as always. She was the same cheerful, tomboyish high school girl since the first time I saw her. Her eyes sparkled, and she burst with laughter. M too was drawn in by A and smiled. She didn’t seem to hold the same suspicious doubts that she had about Kii-chan before her death.

--So, that meant that it wasn’t the elder sister. If that were the case, then the father….no, we still had to be on guard against the mother who was missing.

As I pondered such things, A drew M close to her hugging her head.

“Ah, you look as if you're saying, “Have a nice trip”. We'll be riding together, you know. You’ll be sitting next to me, so make sure you're in good shape, okay?”

“Eeehhh…I’m coming too?”

“Of course you are! If I recall correctly, if the person on the right rows, then it moves toward the left, and if the person on the left rows, then it moves towards the right. If I row alone, I'll just end up going around in circles in the same place, it’ll be meaningless!”

(…Yes, well, that was true.)

“M, don’t you get excited when you see an earth globe? Isn’t it frustrating to think there are still sooo many places out there you’ve never been to? I do! I think about it every day! If I could, I’d go to

the bottom of the sea. I bet there are still dinosaurs surviving somewhere in the world. I mean, there are legends about dragons all over the world, right? They breathe fire, understand human language, and fly. I'm sure they are still alive somewhere. We sisters will discover them and go down in history!"

A's dreams seemed to have gone past the realm of dreams and plunged into delusion – but for some reason, I felt incredibly nostalgic. It felt as if I too had once thought these things and gotten excited. It felt as if I had devoted myself to wandering around in search of such mysterious stories.

"—Ah."

A suddenly raised her face.

At some point, dark clouds had filled the sky, and it a raindrop seemed to have fallen on her cheek.

"Oh no, we didn't even bring an umbrella! Aah, damn it, just how far did mama go? I won't forgive her if she's already back in the cottage eating breakfast before us."

Saying that, A broke off into a run with a smile.

"Ah… wait!"

M chased after her in a panic.

"Hey, it's a race! Hurry up or you'll get wet in the rain!"

A teased M with those words and set off in a light jog.

○

However—

After getting drenched in the rain -- they finally arrived back at the cottage, where their mother was nowhere to be seen.

In fact, the mother did not appear in front of the family even when it was close to evening, when the wind and rain had grown stronger.

“Mama’s cell phone is still in the room; I was searching while you two had gone to the lake, and I found her shoes still here.”

The father spoke exhaustedly, barely able to sit on the sofa.

“So does that mean mama is still somewhere in this cottage?”

The father shook his head at A’s question.

“No, I’ve looked everywhere from the barn to the boiler room and she’s nowhere to be found.”

“In the first place, we weren’t told that the phone didn’t work.”

A complained in a huff.

“Even the cell phone signals are so bad here, and if that black phone is just an ornament, then what are we supposed to do? I thought that manager was fishy somehow!”

The father too, raised his head and looked at the black rotary-dial telephone near the entrance.

“You’re exactly right.”

“Well then, papa. What are we going to do now?”

“I’ll look around once more—and if I can’t find her, I’ll go get the police at the bottom of the mountain in my car. There are old wells nearby she might have fallen into… I don’t want to think about it, but she might have had some sort of accident.”

Saying that, the father picked up the raincoat that was still wet from the coat rack. He had already searched the surroundings of the mansion for the mother several times during the day.

“I’m taking the key. You don’t have to answer the door if someone comes.”

The two sisters remained motionless as they gazed at their father who left through the old wooden front door and locked it from the outside. Eventually, Leo came sniffing and whining at their feet, signaling A to put her hand on M's shoulder, and led her to the living room.

"…It's alright. I'm sure it will be fine. Mama is a glutton after all, she must have gone to the town by the lake and is eating some delicious food right now, taking shelter from the rain because she doesn't have an umbrella."

A's words had no power behind them.

And -- my heart was enshrouded by a dark, terrible cloud that would not clear. I tried calling out to Sako and the old man with all the strength I could muster, but there was no way my voice would reach them. The anger kept surging up inside of me, where the hell had they run off to at a time like this?

The entire mansion was creaking in the strong wind. Occasionally, large drops of rain would ride on the wind to violently pound at the windows. Each time that happened, M, sitting on the sofa, would look anxiously at the window. She gazed at the dark window with a forlorn expression, as if hoping her mother would appear on the other side.

A, who also stared out the window, eventually came down and sat next to M. At that moment, "Leo, what's this?" M reached out for Leo, who lay sprawled down on the floor. There seemed to be something on his mouth. Mistaking it for a pet, Leo squealed happily.

A abruptly turned on the television. She must have wanted to do something to distract herself. She started to check the news channels to see if there were any news reports about any accidents. However, there was no such news on the TV, whose reception was occasionally disrupted by the storm.

Having eaten nothing since morning, A and M opened the candy they had brought and slowly ate them. The passage of time felt absurdly long. The channels kept getting flipped, and even as the clock was about to strike six, neither mother nor father had returned.

“Papa… is late as well.”

It was right when M muttered that. I heard the lock of the front door click, and the sisters, as well as Leo and I jumped and ran towards the front door.

“…Where’s mama? Did you find her?”

The father patted Leo’s head, who had coiled around him, and feebly shook his head.

After that, he brushed a hand through his soaking wet bangs, and was about to say something before he stopped. It seemed he was hesitant on whether it was something he should tell the two, who were still children.

“What about the police? Are they going to look for her?”

“No--”

The father spoke, his voice heavy with emotion.

“All of… all of the car’s tires have been punctured.”

“…Eh?”

“All four have been ripped open with something sharp. Someone seems to have played a terrible prank on us.”

His voice was completely exhausted.

--Punctured? A prank…. Who would do such a thing in a secluded place like this? My suspicion was natural, and it was something everyone must have felt.

“That’s not right.”

A spoke without hesitation.

“There’s no way mama would do something like that, and there’s no one living around here, that suspicious manager—w--wasn’t he the one who did it? That manager! There was something wrong with the

way he looked."

"We can't suspect others without reason."

After the father rebuked her,

"At any rate, there weren't any wells or anything near the cottage. There were several small cliffs which I tried to go down and search, but mama wasn't there either. So I gave up and returned to the car, and that's when I found out about the punctured tires. The engine is turning on, but it would be dangerous to go down the mountain in this storm with that."

He then placed his wet hand one after the other on the head of the two sisters, who fell silent.

"It's alright. I'm sure you were worried, so I came back to tell you two about the situation. I'm going to walk to the police station from here on."

"Eh…that's dangerous, it's raining so hard outside right now."

I, too, vigorously nodded my head. A said there was no way mama would do something like that—but a conclusion had to be reached. And it had to be handled accordingly.

(--Hey, listen to me!)

I spat out the words that were not expected to reach the father.

(There's an exceedingly high possibility that the one who punctured the car tires was the mother. No, it's the work of 'Yoishi' that's inside the mother. And it was clearly done to keep the family stuck here. For what reason? Thinking about the goal makes me completely depressed, but at any rate what I'm saying is that the family needs to stick together. In short, you need to stay with the kids and wait for Sako and the old man to arrive. That's the best course of action!)

But—as expected, my words simply dissolved in the empty void.

"It's alright. Papa was in the yacht club after all. I'm used to moving in the rain. Besides, if mama is out there – then she might be scared

too.”

Saying that, the father crouched a little, turned to face A, and spoke.

“A, take care of M. You have your cell phone, right? It might be hard to get a signal but try to find a place where you can get a good signal and stay there as long as you can. I'll call you as soon as I know anything.”

Saying that, the father opened the door once more; as the howling wind blew in, he flew into the pitch dark exterior.

A shut the door, and after locking it, stayed motionless for a while with her hand upon the doorknob.

“…Onee-chan?”

In response to M’s voice, A wiped the corner of her eyes and said, “Just wait a minute,” and then followed her father outside. M just stood there as she held Leo in her arms, looking like she was about to cry.

I put my hand on M’s shoulder and patted it.

Eventually the door opened, and A returned. Her hair was completely drenched from the rain outside, but her face was now clear, and she firmly embraced M who had come up to hug her.

“I’m sorry, M. I was so worried about all kinds of things I couldn’t bear it. But you know, Papa smiled and said, 『I’m not worried since you’re strong and the elder sister.』 It’s no good if I become weak right now.”

Then, as the elder sister, she cheerfully declared.

“Alriiiight, M. Looks like we’re staying at home. Let’s eat some snacks, ah, I’ll make you some curry if you’re hungry. Let’s watch TV, play cards, and just relax and wait!!”

M nodded with a slight smile in response to her words, as if she gained some courage.

I, too, put my strength in my guts.

I decided that the one who had to keep it together most of all from here on -- was myself.

○

After 9 pm, the storm grew even more intense.

Whenever the entire house made an awful creaking sound, the sisters would look up at the ceiling.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light outside the window, and a sharp sound roared all around. The two sisters screamed in unison – and huddled together on the sofa.

It was a lightning strike. Extremely close by.

At the same time, the television and all the lights in the house turned off.

“…Eh? Eh? A blackout?”

In the pitch-dark cottage, the sound of the wind and rain echoed more intensely.

The mansion was creaking as if it were being smothered by a giant hand from the outside.

“O…onee-chan.”

“It’s alright, wait a second.”

Saying that, A stood up in the pitch-black darkness and headed off somewhere.

“If I recall correctly, there were candles in the kitchen drawer.”

A rustling sound together with that voice echoed nearby.

“—Found it!”

Eventually there was a sound of the gas stove knob being turned, and the candle was lit. She dripped a little wax onto a small plate to make a foundation to keep it from falling over, and returned with it in hand to where M was.

“If you have around three, then it gets quite bright.”

As if talking to herself, A transferred the light to the other candles, and placed them in the other small plates she had brought. When the candles illuminated the top of the low table in front of the sofa -- A winked, ‘Say’.

“It’s like Christmas, isn’t it?”

M smiled slightly.

“But it’s so annoying that the TV isn’t on. I didn’t even set today’s drama to be recorded. Even though it’s dark, there should be something we could play… Oh, no, my phone.”

She said, standing up with the candle in the plate.

“Where are you going?”

“My phone is in my room, I’m just gonna go and grab it.”

“I-I’m coming with you.”

M spoke, refusing to be separated from her elder sister for even the briefest period.

‘Alright’, A took the candle in her left hand, and with her right, kept M’s small shoulders in an embrace as she began to walk.

In the darkness, with only the flickering candlelight as their guide, the sisters slowly exited the living room. They gradually creaked down the corridor to the stairs. In the pitch-dark world, the creaking of the floor which I hadn’t noticed until now, became ever louder.

“Be careful where you step.”

A spoke as she ascended the creaking steps one by one. M, instead of nodding, squeezed the edge of A's clothes in response. I walked further behind M as if clutching on to M's clothes.

From the bottom of the stairs, I heard Leo whimpering.

"We'll be right back, just wait."

M spoke. Leo seemed to be afraid of the steep stairs and did not seem to follow.

Thereupon—halfway up the stairs, the elder sister abruptly stopped in her tracks.

"…Huh?"

"…"

"Did you hear something just now?"

"…I heard it."

M gave a feeble reply.

"A person's voice…?"

--No, rather it was…

"…Mama's…voice…?"

In response to M's whisper, A said, 'That's right', as her voice bounced.

"…That's right, M! Isn't mama still in the house? Look, didn't papa say that mama's shoes weren't missing? Papa said he searched the whole house, but there must have been somewhere he didn't look – and mama must be there right now!"

"But…why would mama be in such a place…?"

"Well, I don't know. She must have entered somewhere she couldn't get out of. I mean, mama has her careless points."

A was very vocal, as if to encourage herself.

“Mama! Are you there? Where are you?”

However, no matter how much she strained her ears afterwards, nothing could be heard anymore.

I, too, tried to concentrate and put all my energy into my ears, but all I could hear was the wind and rain blowing against the building. No – but, just now, I definitely heard something that sounded like a human voice. And, if I were to put my finger on it, it was more like a sobbing voice. A voice that continued to cry for help, but after no one could hear it, the voice died and turned into a sad voice that seemed to have given up on everything.

“…Let’s just go get the phone first. We’ll search after that.”

Saying that, A took M’s hand and began to ascend the stairs once more.

They entered the bedroom, and A grabbed the cell phone on the bedside table. When she turned it on, a bright artificial light illuminated her face.

“Ah…even the pitch is out of range.”

By pitch she was referring to a PHS[16], wasn’t she? That word spread a strange nostalgia in my heart. The realism of being here made me forget all about it, but I might really have been nothing more than weak signals peeking into the world ten years into the past.

“M, they made you carry it too, didn’t they? Is it getting anything?”

Flustered, M produced a white phone from her luggage. It was apparently something the neighborhood association had handed to the children since several suspicious incidents had occurred.

“Hmm… No luck here, either. I mean, it’s pretty much been this way since we came to this mountain.”

She waved the phone in the air over and over again to try and look

for a signal.

“Anyway, let’s try looking for mama.”

M nodded, and the two sisters stepped out into the dark corridor once again.

Since the lights were out, they seemed to have decided not to use the light from the PHS not knowing when they would be able to charge their phones again. With the candle on the small plate in hand, A and M called out to their mother as they continued down the second-floor corridor.

The second floor only had three bedrooms and one toilet. So, there were only a few places to look. The two first investigated the room their mother and father were using. Next, they investigated the attached walk-in closet inside. But there was no one inside, just a few of the parents' clothes on hangers.

Even so, A continued to call “Mama?” out loudly as she tapped around the walls of the closet.

“There’s no hidden room or anything, right?”

A spoke somewhat jokingly, as she went around tapping the walls of the bedroom.

However, a high school girl who was not an expert on buildings probably couldn’t find anything, and she eventually prompted M to move to the next room. They entered one of the three rooms – the room that no one used. But there was no one there. As expected, A called out her mother’s name, and tried to knock on the walls, but the result was the same.

After that, the two sisters came down to the first floor. Leo, who was waiting at the bottom jumped up and down in joy, and M embraced his head and stroked him; thereafter, I, M, A and Leo began to search around the first floor once more. The candle ended up waning midway through, so it was changed to a new one.

“Leo, you have a good nose, so search for mama.”

When A told him that, Leo excitedly began sniffing around. M smiled slightly at this and stroked his ears and said, “Please”. For a while, Leo walked around in front of us as if leading the way, but only accompanied A in tapping on the walls here and there, and did not point to any place in particular.

After holding a candle to the bathroom, toilet, living room, and kitchen, the last room that remained was a storage room at the end of the corridor. The door was opened and therein was a room about 10 sqm wide -- it had vacuum cleaners for janitorial use, step ladders, buckets and mops which were carelessly strewn about. Other than that, there was a large toolbox crammed with tools to the point where tools were placed on top of it, and next to it were several cardboard boxes. Leo rubbed the head of his nose against the toolbox and started to sniff it, but M quickly took him up in her arms, perhaps not wanting him to be covered with dust.

“…Huh?”

A suddenly whispered.

She handed the candle over to M, asked her to give her light, and crouched in front of the cardboard boxes.

“No, there’s no way…right?"

A muttered to herself and shook the cardboard box.

It shook around as if there was something heavy crammed inside.

--No, there’s no way.

I thought that as well, as A slowly put her hand on the cardboard box.

If it was a woman – and moreover one with the extreme flexibility, she might have been able to fit inside this cardboard box… However, I don’t know why they would do such a thing. But it would be wise not to think of the opponent as the mother anymore. It was an existence akin to “concentrated malice”. If – If it was inside this, what would I do? If it held the knife used to puncture the tires, what would I do? Could I protect these sisters?

While I was thinking this, A took a deep breath, and placed her hand on the lid of the cardboard box. Then, she flipped the four parts of the folded lid and opened it in one gulp.

M hid behind A's back, as she held out the candle.

Peeking inside the cardboard box with the illuminated light of the candle, was—

Tightly packed plastic bottles of mineral water.

"Oh, it says it right there on the outside of the box, tasty water…"

A laughed sounding relieved, and then screamed out once more, "Mama?"

There was no one who would answer her tearful question. She tapped on the walls here and there, like she had done in her parents' bedroom, and called out her mother's name together with M. However, as expected, only the hard echoes of solid wood echoed in response from somewhere.

"I guess she's not in the house after all…"

After finishing a check of the entire mansion, A returned to the sofa and muttered feebly.

Even though it was close to midnight, the father did not return, and of course neither Sako nor the old man showed up. A encouraged M, and suggested they return to the bedroom. After making sure that all the doors and windows on the first floor were locked, she tapped M on the shoulder and with deliberate cheerfulness she spoke, "Let's get some sleep".

The two then brushed their teeth with the light from the candle, and carried Leo's food bowl and toilet to the second-floor corridor. M then carried Leo in her arms while A illuminated the bottom of their feet with the light of the candle as they ascended to the second floor.

Leo should have been happy to be together with them, but instead he gave an unusually sharp bark, angering M who shouted in a small angry voice, "Hey!". And he once again had something on his mouth

which M diligently wiped away. Smiling at this, I patted Leo on the head.

When they entered the bedroom, A locked the door. A had a slightly miserable look on her face as she faced M who was looking up at her.

“We can open it when papa and mama come back.”

And with a slightly hoarse voice, she added.

“I'm kind of… scared.”

Her words after that made me gulp.

“Somehow, it feels like… there’s someone else in this house besides us.”

○

Eventually, a *dong* echoed through the mansion.

It was the sound from the pendulum clock installed in the living room on the first floor, signaling that it was now midnight.

The 31st of July – it meant that damned day had finally arrived. The sisters heard that sound in their respective beds. Neither of them was in any condition to fall asleep. They covered themselves deep with their futons and held their breaths, as if to escape their fears. Leo’s cushion was positioned between the two beds. In it, Leo sniffed restlessly.

--*Dong* *Dong*, after twelve notes beat out – the mansion sank into silence once more.

I stood alone in front of the door.

There was nothing I could do physically, but at any rate, I wanted to stay awake and give them some peaceful sleep, however little that may be. With my arms folded, I glared at the darkness with a burning

gaze, and thought to myself.

--Think dammit, think.

Think about the things that were happening now, and the things that could happen from here on. And, come up with the best course of action you can take from here on. First of all, the mother disappeared. That probably happened last night. If it was the mother who stood beyond the frosted glass in the bathroom, that would mean it was the last time M and I saw her. But then why and where did she disappear after that? If 'Yoishi' was inside the mother, what should I do? If I were to meet 'Yoishi', what should I do? It was a terrible thought to have – but if I were plotting to destroy this family, how would I act from now on? If it were me, first – I would somehow deal with the father who was the strongest in the family. If I were to do that, then the sisters would easily be dealt with afterwards – I had thought that far, when I noticed the contradiction. No, if that were the case, then wouldn't it be best to possess the father from the start? After that, the mother, A and M in that order would be the easiest to deal with.

--Huh? What the hell did it mean?

Why did 'Yoishi' possess the mother first? Was there a reason for that?

In the first place, why was it targeting this family? Was there no reason other than the one Takamura and Sako had spoken of, 'Just because it's fun'? Sako and the old man had both said that 'Yoishi' was not an idiot. If that were the case – then shouldn't I first dig out the true root of that 'fun' it felt…?

At that moment—

"…M, are you awake?"

In the darkness, A whispered.

"…Yeah."

"…I'm…I'm sorry…I'm not a very good sister."

“…Eh?”

“It would have been better if I just locked the door without saying anything just now… but I said too much. You’re worried about it, aren’t you?”

She was referring to the words, 『It feels like… there’s someone else in this house besides us.』 To be honest, I began feeling the same way since then.

“…I read somewhere that you shouldn’t say things like that—I’m such an idiot. Look, that’s not the case. It was just my imagination. I needlessly thought that since there’s no one here besides us. Look, what really happened was that mama was lured by the pretty lake shore and went to play, but got lost on the way and is being looked after by the police like a little kid…And, she met papa by now and is apologizing with a tearful look on her face, and papa is poking his head, calling her a moron. Papa tried to call us to let us know what happened, but since there's no signal, he just couldn’t make contact. Right now, they’re headed our way in a police car.”

“Yeah…”

M nodded happily on the bed.

“The family will all be together tomorrow morning, me and M will call mama an idiot and slap her on the shoulders, and Leo will be jumping up and down with joy. …And after that, we’ll laugh together as if none of this ever happened and start this fun trip once again. I’m absolutely sure that will happen, you can bet on it.”

“Yeah.”

“And then you’ll write about it in your summer vacation diary, and mama will get angry when you read that during the second term parents’ visit. Papa and I will laugh when we see that. But I’ll stand by you at that time.”

“…Yeah, thanks.”

M’s voice was gentle, and hoarse.

A was always considerate of M, and M truly relied on A. She must have understood how her younger sister felt, and even though A was scared and worried, she was nonetheless doing her best to be cheerful; Her actions moved my heart at every turn. A, who was only in her first year of high school, was doing her best to put on a brave front, her every word and action was proof of that.

With that situation in mind, I refocused my thoughts once more.

The worst possible scenario conceivable at this point was that the mother was 'Yoishi', hiding somewhere in the darkness, and it was possible that the father who had gone out and could not be contacted… had already been killed. I didn't want to think that was the case, but I had to move forward with that readiness in mind. Therefore, my first priority was the safety of the sisters. For the sake of the two who were still living before my eyes, I had to do what I could.

When – all of a sudden.

Leo suddenly rose up. He might have been expecting that something had begun because of the sound of the sisters' giggling laughter. However, when he realized that he was not going to be allowed to join them, he got up, went to the door, and started pushing it with his snout.

"…Leo, you want to go to the toilet?"

M slowly got up and asked Leo. She looked at Leo who was whining, then looked towards A's bed.

"…Is it alright if we open it?"

"Ah—geez—I guess there's no other choice."

A got up as well and unlocked the door and opened it slightly. From there, Leo disappeared in the darkness beyond the corridor.

"When you're done with the toilet, squeal in front of the door."

Saying that, A closed the door, and locked it once more.

After that, the two of them stayed quiet for a while, and awaited Leo's return, but—

As it turned out, Leo never appeared before the two.

○

"…Onee-chan."

In the darkness, a voice echoed.

"…Why, hasn't Leo returned?"

"……."

"Shouldn't we go and look for him?"

"…It's alright."

"…But..."

"…Let's try and get some sleep, M."

"...But… can't we leave the door open, just a little?"

M got out of the bed, causing A to raise her voice sharply.

"Stop."

"…Onee-chan."

"Stop. Don't open it. Please."

A's voice was shaking.

"…Ah, umm… sorry. Leo is alright. If he wants to come in, he can always scratch at the door… I'm sure he must have fallen asleep somewhere he's comfortable."

"…Okay."

How much time has passed since then?

"…Onee-chan, where do you think mama is?"

"……"

"…We heard her voice a while ago, didn't we…?"

"……..."

"…Onee--"

"Go to sleep, M."

"……..."

"We just misheard then. Mama is…with the police now… and papa is angry with her… tomorrow, we'll all be together again... we'll definitely be together…"

"…Yeah."

The two covered themselves deep in their tower blankets, but it was obvious that neither of them was asleep. In the darkness, the heavy storm violently pounded the roof. The tree branches near the mansion continued to pound the windows. Each time, they would cause the sisters' shoulders to tremble.

I sat at the edge of M's bed as I looked at the situation –

And quietly stood up.

A was at her limit. She was desperately trying not to scare M with her cheerful way of speaking, but the one who must have been afraid was A, who knew there was no basis for her story. And the moment A's heart would burst and collapse, M would be infected by that fear. No, it would be better to assume that M, who was sharp, had already been infected.

At any rate, just where did Leo run off to?

I needed to at least find out that much. And if he was indeed snugly sleeping somewhere, then I'd drag him back into this room somehow, either by coaxing or scolding him depending on the situation.

I made up my mind to do just that, and drew close to the door, when —

I heard that sound.

The sound of the house rattling, of old floorboards creaking.

The creaking, grinding sound seemed to slowly draw closer and closer from somewhere.

(--L-Leo, is that you?)

I tried to say that just in case. However, I knew the reality was next to zero. The sounds of these footsteps were nothing like the pitter patter of Leo's footsteps. Footsteps that were louder than a dog's, heavy footsteps that put their weight into each step, drew closer. For some reason, it felt like that body was wet… and dragging its feet.

--Did A or M notice it?

I immediately checked both their beds, but it seemed they were doing their best to pretend they didn't hear it.

"…It's alright. It's alright, so--- it will all be over tomorrow."

A was whispering, as if trying to convince herself.

"The sky will be blue… papa and mama will both be there… Just like the storm outside… everything will pass."

However—

--*Creak*

--*Creak*

That sound slowly drew closer—and eventually, it stopped in front of the room we were in.

The silence continued for a while after that.

In the dark corridor separated by a single door, it strongly felt as if something was leaning ahead.

I couldn’t move a single finger. It felt as if what stood there was the mother, the father, and something else of a different nature altogether. And for some reason, I thought that it was smiling. ‘Open it’, I felt I was told, but it was already a matter within my own senses. That leaning presence permeated into the room, to the point where I couldn't trust my ears or even my senses. At that moment, something like the sound of water suddenly spread in my head. Eventually, the ringing in my ears took over, and turned into a muffled, unvoiced voice on the other side.

…lease, open iiiiiiiiiiit.

…veryone is scaaaaaared.

I heard an incomprehensible scream that was that of a man and a woman.

…There’s no head.

…There’s no floor.

I thought I heard such voices too. I covered my ears. But the angry voices, as if a man and woman were grappling, continued to reverberate in my head.

…It’s all your fault…your fault…even though I gave up on everything…coward…you coward…you parasite…I’ll kill you like this…I’ll kill you…

I didn't want to hear the screams anymore. It felt like just listening to them was breaking something important. I screamed. I screamed as loud as I could, trying to to drive away the screams out of my head. However-- naturally, I couldn't emit a voice. The torrent of words invaded me like muddy water flowing down a drain.

…There’s no head.

…There’s no floor.

Once more, the unfathomable words reverberated.

And, it was after that.

…hat’s why, I was against it…you’re saying that now…?

(--Against it?)

…hat’s why, you should have aborted it…I didn't want to get pregnant either…

(--Hey, stop it…)

…told you not to give birth to ○○...it was too late to tell me that… everything went wrong after that one was born…I lost my promotion…they got promoted…I became a subordinate thanks to that and went through three painful years…thinking on it now…it happened because my stomach got so big….

(--Stop it--Stop it…!)

…There's no head.

…There's no floor.

○○ --was M's name. I yelled, 'Don't say another word'. My scream pierced through the shell of my self, and roared from somewhere deep inside my body. And it felt that even though it shouldn't have been emitted into reality, that it shook the air, and echoed out into the world.

No…I'm sure it must have been my imagination.

Overwhelmed by fear, it must have been an auditory hallucination heard by my chaotic state of mind.

In reality – I merely collapsed on the spot, and lost consciousness.

○

When I came to, I heard the birds chirping outside the window.

With a start, I got up, and saw that A and M were asleep in their beds.

The door was still locked, and bright light was pouring in through the window curtains.

It looked like I ended up losing consciousness at some point. In the darkness, the mother's disappearance, the father's failure to return, and Leo not coming back. All these things filled the mere discarnate entity that I was and overfilled my already meagre capacity. No—it might have been because I had been stressed out the whole time recently, yesterday and before that as well.

At any rate, in the outside world, which I could see through the

curtains, the rain had already stopped.

Although it was cloudy, it was still quite bright.

I finally got up, encouraged by the fact that morning had arrived.

I then took a deep breath and passed through to the other side of the door.

I softly slipped out alone into the corridor.

The corridor was deathly silent.

For a while, I held my breath as I surveyed my surroundings. Then I remembered and called his name: ‘Leo?’

However, Leo, who would always sense my presence somehow, did not appear from anywhere. I quietly approached Leo's toilet. There was no sign of him having relieved himself there. I tried going to the stairs and looked down at the floor below. That's where I recalled, ‘That's right’. He was afraid of the stairs. If he couldn't even go up, it would be more unlikely that he could go down. So that meant that he was still somewhere on the second floor?

(—Hey Leo. Where are you?)

I called out to him, as I tried going to the parents’ room.

I nervously slipped through the door and entered inside. The window curtains were left open, and from there I saw the branches of a sawtooth oak. They were no longer shaking violently from the wind. And I heard the chirps of countless birds from somewhere.

I tried looking under the bed, in the closet, behind the table -- but Leo was nowhere to be found.

I tried going to the unused bedroom. However, Leo was not there either. That was it for the second floor. So that meant that there was no other option but to go downstairs. I slowly descended the stairs.

After coming downstairs, I passed the corridor, and peeked into the living room, where I found Leo at long last.

He was sitting there well behaved as he looked up somewhere.

—What the, hey, Leo.

(Did you come down here alone? What were you doing? We were worried about you.)

As I called out to him, I caught sight of the object.

……

At the spot Leo was gazing at, a set of human legs hung down.

I slowly looked up. Wet sneakers led up to a navy-blue raincoat. And wrapped around the neck was a thin but sturdy rope, the kind used for tying luggage on bicycles. The other end of the rope was tied to a bare beam near the top of the roof. The face, with its congested neck, pallor mortis set in, and stretched tongue, belonged to the father that was supposed to have gone to the police.

『…There's no floor.』

The words that reverberated in my head last night rang in the back of my ears once more.

There was indeed a gap of around two meters from the father's feet to the floor.

……Why?

Those were the first words that rushed from my mouth. Why was the father here when he should have gone to the police? Why was he in a place like this with his neck hung?

At that moment, a brown shadow moved at the edge of my vision; I looked in a daze to see Leo going off somewhere.

His profile brought a shiver down my spine. And I remembered the

feeling of unease I had once felt.

With a start, I looked above the hearth on the wall. Arranged there was the picture of the entire family taken with the polaroid camera when they arrived here. I drew closer and examined the picture once more. I opened my eyes wide and examined every inch of it. I slowly stared at each of them, trying my best to uncover the source of the unease.

And—I realized.

Everyone was smiling. The father, the mother, A, M…and, even Leo.

That's right, even Leo was smiling, the corners of his mouth were twisted into a sneer.

(It can't be.)

I turned my head unsteadily in the direction Leo had disappeared to.

Leo was there. He was sitting in the corridor, looking my way, and quietly sneering.

(--It can't be, you're…)

The moment my trembling voice called out that name, Leo abruptly spun around and disappeared into the back of the corridor.

In a panic, I chased after him. I came out into the corridor to see Leo calmly striding towards the room furthest at the back. It continued towards the storage room. Thereupon, I realized. The front door of the storage room was slightly opened. A was sure to have closed it yesterday. Leo slightly touched the door from the tip of his nose, and it slowly opened further. Light shone inside the dark depths, and that spectacle filled my vision.

A black stain was spreading out on the floor of the storage room. I felt something nauseating and disgusting wafting through the air. And then, I saw it. There was a cardboard box and a large toolbox on the floor – and the toolbox had fallen over and was lying open. Inside the box, I saw long hair. Inside was the mother. No, what was once the mother was neatly stored in pieces. I could see a bloodless, white

hand. A jumbled leg stuck out haphazardly. One eye peeking out was wide open, and a fly was perched on its eyeball.

--A…..aagggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…….

Unable to bear it any longer, I fell to the ground. There was nothing for me to throw up, and it was physically impossible for me to throw up, but I just wanted to throw up everything unpleasant that was swelling up inside me. But there was nothing more painful than the feeling of vomiting without anything to vomit. I merely felt the pain of my stomach about to to churn inside out, and with my face distorted in agony, I looked at Leo who had come up close to me.

(Yo, how are you feeling?)

Leo looked at me like he wanted to say that as he wore an intimate, slanted smile.

(Did you finally notice it? Even though I was there from the start. You've had a hard time looking for me everywhere.)

Feeling like I was told that, I looked at the toolbox in a daze.

…Ah. I thought that there were tools outside because they couldn't fit in the toolbox -- but now I understood that it was because something else was stored inside.

(Now then.)

As I saw Leo gently turn on his heel, I was finally aghast.

Seeing Leo dexterously hop up the stairs – I realized after all this time, that A and M were still up there.

(--H…hey, wait…)

Weak in the knees, I managed to stand up, and chased after Leo.

Leo climbed the stairs in the blink of an eye and went straight to the door of the bedroom M and A were sleeping in. He then nuzzled against the door, and lovingly called out in a whine.

(--S, stop messing around… Stop fucking around…you….!!)

I, too, climbed to the top of the stairs and extended my hand to pull Leo away from the door. But as was inevitable, my hand slipped through.

Leo looked up my way, he was indeed sneering with satisfaction. Once more, he pretended to whine, 'kuun'.

“…Leo?”

On the other side of the door, I heard M’s sleepy voice.

“…Leo? Are you back?”

I heard M getting out of bed and pictured her happily approaching the door.

(…Stop…Stop it...)

Before I’d realized, I was pleading with my hands clasped together, kneeling on the spot.

(Please…at least leave these sisters alone. They haven’t done anything wrong. Aren’t they just two sisters close with each other? Aren’t they still so young?)

Tears flowed down my cheeks as I continued to plead with body and soul – but the sound of the lock being unlocked with a clank echoed from behind the door.

I plunged me into despair, and the moment a delightful smile filled Leo’s face—

A sharp bang rang out.

For a moment, I sat there, not knowing what had happened.

The bedroom door which had almost opened closed once more, and A’s half-asleep voice overlapped from inside, “--What is it?”

“Don’t move!”

A familiar voice rang out, and Leo ran down the stairs at a lightning pace.

Looking at the bottom of the stairs, that small shadow crossed the old detective who was yelling with a gun in his hands.

“I told you not to move!”

He shot. But the bullets didn’t touch Leo, and he ran outside the front door, which the old man had probably wrenched open. The old man surveyed the situation outside the entrance for a while, before he eventually closed the door, and entered the mansion with the gun in one hand. With a disgusted look on his face, he looked at the father hanging in the living room, and at the storeroom at the end of the corridor. He then creaked up the stairs once more to the second floor.

“Hey, are you alright?”

He called out to the sisters’ bedroom.

“…W, who is it?”

In response to A’s trembling voice, the old man tried to sound as gentle as he possibly could.

“I’m a police officer. Is your younger sister with you? She knows who I am. Listen to me.”

“…Ah.”

M’s voice rang out, and she seemed to be talking with A. After that the door to the bedroom was unlocked.

The door opened, and when I saw M's white, pale, beautiful face on the other side, I burst into tears again.

“We’re leaving this place. Hurry up and get ready.”

“…The police—Did papa call you? What about mama?”

The old man bit his lips and shook his head in response to A’s question.

“Never mind that, I’ll explain along the way. Just hurry up and change -- Hey, stop!”

Sensing something ominous, A tried to run out into the corridor by slipping under the detective’s arm while still in her pajamas. The detective firmly caught her with his brawny arms and spoke in a low tone of voice.

“Please, just get changed. And from here, close your eyes for a while. There are things in this world – that should never be seen.”

Case 00 – Chapter 5: A Person Who Is Nothing

The old man continued down the mountain road, taking A and M with him, who had changed into jeans, pants, and matching cardigans. The clouds in the sky slowly moved, and the sun had begun to shine, but the road was still dark because of the overgrown shrubbery.

A and M’s faces were pale, as they dizzily walked on.

The old man tried to hide the terrible spectacle downstairs by covering their eyes with both hands as they left the mansion, but it was impossible for him to accomplish that completely. Leaving aside the mother in the storage room, they immediately ended up noticing the father hanging from the center of the living room.

Seeing her father's figure, A screamed out loud; M was merely in shock. Unable to do anything, I merely hung my head down. The old man forcefully carried the two out of the mansion. Still, he had trouble with A who was screaming frantically; With his left hand he forcibly pulled M, and with his right hand, he at last managed to carry A on his shoulder. With a dizzy gait like that of a doll, M merely followed.

The old man's car was at the end of a side street around three-hundred meters below the mansion. By the time they arrived there, A had gotten quiet, but it was as if she had fallen unconscious with her eyes still open, or as if the thin line of her consciousness had been cut off. I merely watched her from inside the stuffed frog that M continued to strongly hold on to.

The old man opened the car door, made the two sit in the back seat, and sat down in the driver's seat himself.

He then moved to grab a cigarette from the dashboard, before stopping his hand with the click of his tongue. He might have hesitated to smoke in an enclosed space with children present.

“...I'm not sure how I should go about explaining it--but listen carefully.”

The old man began to explain as he gazed at the two sisters in the rearview mirror.

“You already saw it, so I'll just say it. Take it in. Your papa and mama... have passed on to the next world. It was not by choice. In short, they were killed. If you were to ask who did it, it was something called ‘Yoishi’. And ‘Yoishi’ is not a living person.”

Having spoken that far, the old man scratched his stiff gray hair.

“You might be thinking, ‘What is this old man saying?’ but -- ahh, the younger sister will understand. It's the thing that was inside Kii-chan. That thing moves from person to person. And, it destroys the people it possesses and the people around them. The incidents that have been occurring in your town were probably the work of ‘Yoishi’. And right now, it's inside your pet dog.”

“...In Leo?”

Thereupon, M finally asked in reply, and the old man nodded bitterly.

“That's right, it's that dog Leo. Leo isn't the Leo from before anymore. From now on. If that dog appears before you again, you must not approach it. If you see him, tell me immediately.”

It was not possible to understand or accept such things after they were explained in rapid succession. Tears gradually began to flow from A and M's eyes once more.

(--Ah…I’m powerless…)

Inside the stuffed frog, all I could do was blame myself as such.

I knew this was going to happen more than two weeks in advance. I

knew it would happen, and yet I could do nothing. I wanted to protect this family somehow, but all I could do was let this day come. Right now, I had no idea what to say to the sisters with the reality in front of me. The words I could offer would be too little to the sisters who ended up seeing that gruesome spectacle. I didn't entirely know what was happening, and I didn't know what would happen from now on. And what's more, neither my hands, nor my words, would reach anyone. All I could do was snuggle close up to A and M.

However, it was the same for the old man who was alive in this world—

“For the time being, let's go to a nearby police station.”

The old man eventually moved his eyes away from the sisters to turn and face forward once more, and he turned the car’s ignition key.

And, as the engine was about to sputter and turn on -- “Ah”.

Hearing that voice, I too, looked beyond the windshield.

In front of the car was a familiar, tall and slender man.

--S, Sako?

Sako Takito stood still there, dressed spiffily in a black hakama over white clothes along with tall wooden clogs. His long black hair seemed to shine wet with luster as it was combed down. His face, which had always seemed pale and in poor health, looked to be even paler than usual.

“Yo.”

Sako spoke, causing the old man to push his face out of the window and yell.

“Don’t act so casually! Where the hell have you been?”

“To many different places.”

“What do you mean different places? Anyway, just get in! Let's get away from here. ‘That thing’ is in the dog right now. And it's still

around here somewhere.”

“It's about that actually.”

Sako spoke after giving a brief glance to the thicket in his surroundings.

“Don't you find it a little strange?”

“What did you say?”

The old man, who probably didn't hear him over the noise of the car, turned off the engine for the time being and angrily got out. I, too, came out of the frog after taking a glance at the sisters who were still in a daze. I approached Sako together with the old man.

“What did you say just now?”

“I said, aren’t we acting a little too conveniently for ‘Yoishi’?”

“What do you mean? It’s inside the dog. Besides that--”

Thereupon, the old man looked back at the car once before lowering his voice.

“The mother is in pieces. The father is hanging by the neck. I thought for a minute that it might have been one of the sisters, but that wasn't it. I peeked in the house through the window every morning, but a while ago, that dog was just staring at the father hanging from the ceiling, and it looked back and sneered. After that it deliberately went to the storage room and sneered again. Where in the world can you find a sneering dog?”

“However, even if you were to say that it was inside the dog -- then it wouldn’t explain the entirety of the horror that unfolded in that mansion.”

Sako spoke with his hands in his pockets as he declared dispassionately.

“All ‘Yoishi’ can do is to possess. The only thing it can use is the body it possesses. Based on the size of a dog, it can't use large tools that a

human can. It couldn't have dismembered the mother, much less hung an adult male from a beam with the body of a Yorkshire terrier.”

“Then, what does it all mean?”

“There is only one answer. ‘Yoishi’ is not present inside the dog.”

Astonished by those words-- the old man looked back in the direction of the car once more. As he stared at the sisters with their heads hung down in the back seat, he asked Sako.

“Are you saying that it's inside one of the two sisters?”

“No-- we still have three humans who are possible here. Me, you, and the guardian spirit that is probably here.”

….Eh…?

“And there is one more thing that is a matter of concern. Why, exactly, is Yoishi doing something like this? The Tengu incident in S-town, the headless incident in K-town. Looking back at the circumstances of those two incidents, Niizawa-san was hung from a height of around four meters above the ground in S-town. Nagami-san from K-town had his head chopped off with enough force to launch it far beyond the window. Don't you think they were experiments conducted for the sake of the present? Weren't they a little too elaborate to merely be done ’just for fun’?”

“…”

“To us humans, this series of murders were extremely brutal occurrences of sadness and gloom-- however that is, to the very end, a psychological phenomenon of the human world; Shouldn’t we look at it from its perspective, that of a ghost with some unknown objective? That’s what I believe. Until we grasp that, we cannot deal with what is to happen from here on.”

“…Then, what are you saying we should do?”

“For now, let’s return to that mansion.”

“What did you say?”

“There's something I'm curious about. I want to try doing at least one thing that is beyond its expectations.”

The old man glared motionlessly at Sako’s pale face, before eventually spitting once and returning to the car.

He then opened the back seat and informed the sisters, “He's alright.”

“That man is a priest; He solves various things for me, so just wait here.”

A and M both looked back at the old man in a daze, but their faces were hopeless. And more so than M, A looked at the old man with a clinging gaze as she grabbed the sleeve of his worn-out suit. He gently wrapped his hand around hers, and hugged them both with both hands as he talked to them.

“I'm sure there's a lot you don't understand. But trust me. I'll definitely come back. Lock the doors, you’ll be safe here.

“Do you have a phone?”

A and M timidly took out the PHS from their pockets.

“Alright. This is my number. If something happens, call me. I'll come running right away.”

Saying that, the old man handed over a scribbled memo, and placed his large hand on the sisters’ heads one after the other.

“Listen to me all right. The one thing I can tell you right now is, that your parents ended up going to the heavens, but they are still close and still love you. It might be a while, but you'll definitely see them again one day. And you guys have to live your life to the fullest from here on out, so that you don't have to be ashamed when that time comes.”

The old man's words moved my heart deeply as I merely stood and watched. I thought he was doing a good job, and that the old man’s

broad back was quite dependable. However, at that moment, I suddenly looked in Sako's direction – and was taken aback.

For some reason, Sako's face looked pale.

His narrow eyes were wide open, and his eyeballs flickered as if they were chasing something that was not here.

That was as if—

He had noticed something hidden in something he had overlooked up until now, and despaired of the darkness of where that possibility could lead to.

○

When the front door to the mansion was opened, the old man couldn't help but let out a groan once more.

The living room across the corridor was already visible from there. And the father was still hanging there.

I only realized it now, but something like a puddle of body fluid had formed under his feet.

"What now?"

In response to the old man's question, Sako proceeded to the living room without a word. He then surveyed the surroundings, and eventually shook his head.

"It already disseminated. That might have been our only hope."

(--Do you mean to say that the father's spirit is not here?)

I asked, but of course my question went unnoticed, the old man and Sako then proceeded to the storage room this time still wearing their shoes. I didn't want to see it anymore, so I waited in the corridor.

“This is the mother. Can you find out anything?”

“……..”

Sako crouched on the spot, and seemed to be examining the cuts and other details.

I took deep breaths and stared at the white wall, trying my best not to recall the mother’s body I had seen this morning.

Sako eventually emerged from the storage room at a brisk pace and went upstairs.

He then opened the doors of all the bedrooms one after the other, and dashed into the sisters’ room. He then continued to glare at midair. The old detective seemed to have had enough of his bizarre behavior, and finally asked.

“…Hey, did you figure out anything?”

However, Sako didn’t answer him at all. He continued muttering something to himself.

“…However, if that’s the case then what will happen? It’s not my intention to pile hypothesis upon hypothesis – but if that’s the case, then only one line ties it together… That thread leads nowhere else…”

“Hey, Sako!”

The moment the old man placed a hand on Sako’s back from behind.

Sako slowly turned around.

His scrawny cheeks cast a shadow, but he seemed to be smiling somehow, which brought a shiver down my spine.

“What happened?”

“No, I ended up realizing it.”

“Realizing… what?”

Without answering the old man – Sako slowly swayed and slipped past us towards the outside of the room.

“…H-hey! Sako!”

The old man chased after Sako as he began to descend the stairs. I, of course, followed.

“Wait, what do you mean?”

The old man caught up to him downstairs and asked him while pulling on his sleeve, Sako turned around shakily as if he had had no weight at all.

“It means we can’t stay here anymore.”

“…Huh?”

“It means that we are all just pawns.”

For some reason… those words made my hair stand on ends. I had no idea whatsoever what Sako was trying to say, but his words seemed to touch on something that was at the heart of the matter.

“Me, you, and Mr. Guardian spirit. All of us are pawns of ‘Yoishi’.”

“That’s what I’m saying you should explain.”

“Even though I intended to proceed with the ample knowledge of Yoishi having intelligence – and I was also aware that it was a mass of malice – but until I revise my understanding of it even further, I cannot deal with it.”

“By malice… you mean having such young sisters witness such a spectacle?”

“…That’s not it.”

Sako spoke as he began to walk unsteadily.

“That was merely the surface. The reality was to force you, me, and everyone else to be an actor without realizing it.”

“I’m asking you what tha--”

“At any rate.”

Sako turned around, and spoke with an expression of seriousness I had never seen before.

“I will be leaving now.”

“…Wha--?”

“My very presence here might be its trap.”

Saying that, Sako disappeared into the sunlight like a gust of wind.

“…What is wrong with that guy?”

For a while, the old man stared dumbfounded at the front gate where Sako disappeared, but eventually clicked his tongue violently and looked around the mansion.

“A trap? What is he talking about? He had the nerve to leave me alone in a place like this.”

The old man didn’t seem to realize that I was still there as he talked to himself – but I felt the same way. A furious rage swelled up inside me; After all that talk, after all that knowledge, and after all that pompous lecturing, he just ran away from the enemy at the end of the day. That was why I stayed here. It felt as if I were declaring to someone that I was different from Sako.

“Whatever the case, I can’t just leave those two sisters alone.”

However, the old man’s words suddenly made me realize.

…That’s right. Enough of that bastard Sako for now. I think they’ll be

fine and safe inside the car even if Leo comes close, but I'm certainly worried.

The old man was about to return to the sisters, when he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"But… just what was it that he figured out?"

--Ahh, the old man was a detective after all. It would be impossible for me to be alone in a place like this with two bodies. I would have run off straight away. Or rather, I would go call for help. However, since the chief priest known as Sako had disappeared, the old man might have instead hardened his resolve. The old man's movements had gotten sharper. He took out a pair of white gloves, wore them on both hands and moved closer to the father's corpse once more. After putting his palms together for a bit, he gazed at the beam, and at the surroundings. Then, as if being struck with an idea, he ran towards the storage room the mother was in. He confirmed that a step ladder was present there, and grabbed it. He returned to where the father was, set it up there, and nodded. Perhaps he thought that it could have possibly been used to hang the father. Thereafter, he once again returned to the storage room, and after placing his palms together in front of the corpse of what was once the mother, crouched down and began to investigate.

"The cut sections of the body have the same cuts. It was probably this."

He said, picking up a saw that must have been originally present in the toolbox. Ah, why didn't I realize it in the first place? If you looked closely, you could see what looked like a dark red piece of flesh clinging to it.

"No hiding the murder weapon, or washing it, huh?"

I somehow understood what the old man was thinking.

It added credibility to what Sako had said before he came here, 『'Yoishi' is not present inside the dog. 』 It was true that a small sized dog like a Yorkshire Terrier couldn't put a saw in his mouth, much less drag a step ladder out to the living room.

“But the enemy – is that ‘thing’.”

The old man whispered as if warning himself, and I recalled once more.

--Ah, that's right. When he was talking to M, he spoke of a woman possessed by ‘Yoishi’ who was also easily able to dangle a child with one hand. So, if it possessed a dog, was that possible?

The old man took a phone out of his pocket.

He held it up for a while, but it must have been out of range. He clicked his tongue and put it away again.

“It’s no use, I have to call forensics for this.”

He then walked straight out of the front door. With a gloomy look on his face. he shoved his hands in his pockets as he made large strides in the direction of the gate. However, midway through, he looked back for some reason. And his eyes opened wide as if he had noticed something.

“…Ah.”

(--Eh?)

The old man started running. He ran towards the rear of the mansion.

(--W, where are you going?)

I tried to ask, but it quickly entered my field of vision as well. Between the gate and the mansion was a narrow path, overgrown with weeds. Something light brown was lying down at the base of an oak tree.

--It was Leo.

I knew it was Leo. The old man took out his gun from his waist as he ran. He held it up at about two meters away and spoke sharply.

“Don’t move.”

Those words might have been a bit comical to someone unaware of the situation. For the opponent was a small-breed dog collapsed motionless. However, I had seen Leo sneering at me this morning. I was cowering behind the old man, afraid that he could start moving at any moment, and speak 'Yo' in a low tone of voice.

"Hey, it's you, isn't it?"

The old man called out once more, keeping his sights at the collapsed dog. However, Leo didn't even twitch. The old man slowly drew closer with his gun still drawn. He slowly crouched down, touched Leo's neck, and turned him over. I, too, came in front of him, and looked carefully.

However, Leo – was already dead.

There was a large wound between his forelegs and back legs, and he had breathed his last.

--Did that mean that the old man's bullets hit him back then?

I cocked my head in puzzlement, when—

"No… I'm sure I missed back then."

The old man muttered behind me.

--Then what did it mean? Did it mean that he died of the bullets that had missed him? No, the most important thing now that Leo was dead was… what about 'Yoishi' that was inside? Was it alright now that Leo was dead? Or did it transfer to someone else?

"…Hmm?"

At that moment, the old man suddenly reached out his hand. He reached in and felt around Leo's mouth with the long fur -- one of the characteristics of a Yorkshire Terrier.

"What the hell is this?"

I couldn't look at it properly. I waited for the old man to pull out his hand and check it with his own fingertips.

“…Is this, a bond?”

(--Bond?)

Ah… If I recall correctly… M seemed to have been constantly worried about Leo’s mouth and kept wiping it.

Did that mean that *someone* bonded the hairs around Leo's mouth into a smiling shape? In short, the sneer I saw on Leo’s face was an illusion caused by the bond, and ‘Yoishi’ wasn’t inside Leo? It can’t be, when he ran up the stairs… he wholeheartedly wanted to see M and A?

That realization stabbed my chest coldly, and a heavy regret filled my heart.

--Ahh…if that was the case…

Then I had forever lost the only existence that ever acknowledged me with certainty. I foolishly doubted the precious existence which brought tranquility to me as a ghost, and –

(And just as Sako had said, ‘Yoishi’, was now…)

I had thought that far, when I heard a loud and dull thud from behind.

A groaning sound subsequently reached my ears, and I looked around in a hurry.

The old man's face was distorted. A cold sweat appeared on his forehead, and I had no idea what the source was of his expression—but eventually he collapsed, and a familiar smile appeared behind the sunlight.

It was…A.

Her short bob of healthy hair was illuminated in the sunlight, and she was grinning broadly.

(...Eh, why is A here? What happened to M…?)

However, I noticed it in the next moment.

A was clutching a large pair of sewing scissors in her right hand, and its pointy tips were dyed in dark red.

The collapsed old man groaned while clutching his right side. The right side of his business suit was stained black in the blink of an eye, and fresh red blood flowed from the crevice of the burly hand that held it down.

"…Y, you."

As the old man strenuously tried to turn around, A showed her white teeth.

"Yo, it's been a long time."

That voice was as deep as a man's.

"You shot me before, didn't you?"

Saying that, A painfully kicked the old man in the stomach with the toe of her shoes. Even though it didn't look as if she put her back into it, it was a kick sharp enough to make the old man's body jump.

"The pain from back then was nothing compared to this."

Saying that in a deep voice, A then held the sewing scissors inverted, and before I could yell at her to stop, she thrust them deep into the old man's stomach. And then, as if relishing the old man's squirming, she twisted the tip of the scissors around inside his body before taking it out. Fresh blood splattered all over and dyed A's face red.

"And here too."

Next, A indifferently stabbed the old man in his thigh. The tip of the scissors must have struck a bone, a thudding noise sounded and when she took it out, blood gushed out.

I watched the scene in a daze.

I was helpless, speechless, as I watched the moment of a life being

cut off.

Eventually, the old man stopped moving, and A looked in my direction.

It was a natural gesture, enough to make me forget that I was an invisible existence no one could see.

--A dark colored…light.

For some reason, those words suddenly appeared in my mind… as I looked at the radiance that resided in her eyes when she fixed her gaze towards me.

“Hey, you there. Try doing something about it.”

She then contorted her lips into a sneer.

I finally realized at last, as I looked at the smile that made my knees buckle.

I heard the sound of it all clicking together: all the doubts, the questions I had left unanswered until now.

--The rumor that Kii-chan’s ghost appeared in the classroom at night. The originator of that rumor.

--Who it was that suggested this family trip.

--The shadow which I thought was the mother when I was in the bath with M.

Was it A…?

Did that mean it was inside A the whole time…?

“There’s no way you can do anything about it.”

A stared at me as if looking down on me,

“Now then, there’s only one thing left to do.”

Saying that, she happily threw the scissors down on the spot and turned her back on me.

○

I was lost in my thoughts.

Or perhaps I wanted to escape into my thoughts and distance myself from reality.

I just wanted to think about what the hell was going on more slowly. I knew I had no time to think, but there was one thing I had to be clear on. As if groping around in the dark, I touched on that puzzle.

That was-- just what was ‘Yoishi’ doing all this for in the first place.

Sako spoke of it as well. That ‘it destroys simply because it’s amusing’. That might have been the case. I couldn't understand it at all, but there might be those in this world who can’t help but have that inclination. However, he also said, 『Weren't they a little too elaborate to merely be something done ’just for fun’?』

Right, just now, A – no, ‘Yoishi’ said it. 『Now then, there’s only one thing left to do.』. Didn't that mean that there was something it had been carefully building up to at this point? Didn’t that mean that it was all part of some elaborate plan? But – just what was that? For what purpose was ‘Yoishi’ doing all this?

Firstly – was the Tengu Incident. On that occasion, ‘Yoishi’ must have been inside the man named Niizawa. After making him climb up to the branches on the stepladder and hanging himself – it probably possessed Kii-chan and removed the stepladder, adding a sense of unease to the scene. And that was also for the experiment of hanging the father, as mentioned by Sako. Then what about the headless incident? That must have been in order to dismember the mother. It possessed the person named Nagami, made him behead himself, then used Kii-chan’s body to close the window. With that, a sense of

unease was left at the scene of the crime. Then, why did it kill Kii-chan? If I recall correctly, the old man said, 『It was as if to see how far her body would go before it died』. Perhaps that too was an experiment, and that was as far as the experiment went. After going through those series of experiments, it must have confirmed what it could and could not do with a human body. Then – here comes the important part, why did it conduct these experiments? What was 'Yoishi' ultimately trying to accomplish?

'Yoishi' having possessed A after Kii-chan, killed the mother, dismembered her, and stored her in the toolbox as soon as it arrived here. The father was murdered when he was about to go to the police, he was hanged somewhere outside, and after M had fallen asleep, his body was hung inside the house once more. In the midst of all those actions, it tampered with Leo's mouth, to hide the fact that it was inside A. What was the meaning in that? Dammit, I had no idea.

I had no idea, but at any rate, M was the only one left, and I was sure M had something to do with 'the only thing left to do', I was sure A was trying to do something with M – as I desperately worked out the thoughts in my head, when--

Suddenly, Sako's unhealthy pale face appeared in my mind.

…That guy, just what in the world did he realize?

Why was Sako so afraid, and why did he disappear in such a hurry?

『It means we can't stay here anymore.』

『It means that we are all just pawns.』

『Because us staying here itself might be its trap.』

--What did he mean by all that? What did he mean by including not only the flesh and blood humans, but even me in this category, who was not supposed to be alive in this world?

I took a deep breath, calmed myself down-- and recalled everything that happened up until now the best I could: Before I met M, and after I met M... And from there, I drew everything in my mind I had

experienced, one by one, in turn. The day when I, who was nothing more than weak electric signals, defined ‘myself’. All the memories engraved on ‘myself’ since that point. There, the me from before, in those fragments of countless memories and scenes that were unknown to me, mixed in and melted together. “The highest order and the lowest order”-- For some reason, those words of Takamura came back to me. As always, I didn't know what they meant, but they fit my current situation to a tee. The many layers of my memories were being overwritten, and the idea of "me," which was supposed to be the highest order, could no longer be constructed, and in that moment—

At the limits of my murky thoughts, she appeared.

A young girl with long black hair and white porcelain-like skin was wearing a black blazer with a black tie.

Her hair danced in the wind, and as she held out her hand as if beckoning me, she whispered somewhat happily.

“Everything, is in reverse.”

(A….a, arrrrrrrrrrrrrrghh!!)

Something inside me screamed, and in that instant, the answer suddenly hit me on the head.

With a feeling of disgust that almost made me vomit, I felt as if I understood ‘Yoishi’s’ true intentions.

No—no, I still didn’t know if that was correct. I didn’t know, but if it was – then everything fit together perfectly. At the same time, that word which had been a jewel to me, had now slowly transformed into malice itself.

I returned from the depths of my thoughts with a deep sense of futility.

In reality, I was still present in the rear garden of the mansion. And

there was no time left: Everything would be over once A reached M. I didn't know if it was right or not, but I decided to bet on it anyway. However, being nothing more than a ghost in corporeal form, could I reach M before A even if I ran? No, that was impossible. Couldn't… I deliver my message to M in some other way?

In that moment, a divine revelation came down to me.

That's right – there's that thing.

I clasped my hands once before the old man who had collapsed and no longer moved, and immediately slipped into his pocket. In the right pocket of the old man's jacket – the cell phone that lay tumbled there. I tried to possess it with everything I had. Even the cell phones of this age must have had a texting function. And M had a PHS in her hand. The problem was whether there would be a signal, but I had no choice but to bet on the slim possibility.

I dissolved my existence in the air, and assimilated myself into the silver device with countless electronic components built in.

Being nothing more than weak electric signals, there was only one thing I could do as an infinitely meaningless existence in this world. That was to use the internet as an intermediary to move as a discarnate entity. If I could do it with the search terminal in the library, I should be able to do it here too.

A signal, a signal – let it be any signal, no matter how weak, just carry me away! Reaching out with both hands, my arms in my consciousness pierced through the old man's body, slipped through the mansion, and reached up to the heavens. With my fingers stretched out as if to grab the wide-open sky, I grabbed a signal in the 800-megahertz radio band wandering the skies. I can do it! I slipped myself into the world of the internet.

What stretched out before me, was a world compressed with bit rates of zeros and ones. I was cast out in a world of countless linked extranets, then disseminated, and roughly understood the organizational information that made up the Internet.

In short, all I had to do was find a virtual server, and turn myself into

the correct e-mail account. However, when I fabricated my ID, password, and stepped into the virtual private server once again, it seemed I had made some kind of mistake. The load balancer came alive, and I was forwarded to a place I didn't expect. Without knowing which way was up and which was down, I was whirled round and round in an infinite space, and then, perhaps triggered by a spam assassin, I found myself surrounded by many strange, emotionless people. I yelled, “Get out of the way”. However, they silently encircled me. They even brought out a long, sharp-looking blue dragon sword in their hands. [17]

Of course, all of this was my subjective view.

However, that's just what the world was. The world that the brain believes in is all there is.

“Ah, bring it on then.”

Someone howled inside of me. At the same time, an intense fighting spirit swelled up inside of me. I couldn't allow my consciousness to be lost in this vast world. There was a young girl I had to save no matter what. That girl called me a ‘friend’ in this world filled with malice. I couldn't betray her, even if I’m ripped limb from limb!

I planted my foot firmly in place, and armed myself. Here, where will itself was digitized, I could produce any large weapon I wanted to in my hands. But only within the range of my absolute mass. In short, I made my right leg disappear, and transformed both of my hands into large war tridents[18]. I brandished them with all the power I could muster, and started to smash their swords one after the other. I continue to slice off their arms, their heads, and their torsos. I yelled, and raged, and before I realized, I found myself surrounded by guys in armored black suits who covered the entire ground, but I continued to blow them away without mercy. The sky flickered. An electrical sound that sounded like thunder violently exploded. However-- this violent rampage might have impaired some system somewhere. When I looked around, my surroundings were in chaos. The sky was enveloped in a whirlpool of black clouds that began to swirl round and round. Knowing that, I extended my extremely thin left foot even as I continued to fight and blended it into the net space. I then managed to locate that information and dragged it out. It

seemed there was a cold standby – in short, a mechanism that activated the standby system in the event of a failure. I decided to make use of that. It would take some time to restore as compared to a hot standby, and as my left foot continued to be connected to the Internet, I continued to beat up the spam assassins. That's right, I was stalling for time. As the chaotic world became even more chaotic and uncontrollable, I transferred my entire mass in one fell swoop. I continued to convert myself into a single e-mail, but—now, after all this time, I suddenly realized something.

The contents of the e-mail.

That's right, I hadn't thought anything about what the e-mail would say. What did I need to write in order to save M? I hectically calculated my mass and the time it would take to reach the server that had jurisdiction over M's PHS, and realized that only twenty or so characters was all that could reach her. Wait – just twenty characters? Only that much? How would I be able to let M know of the danger with just that much? I felt gloomy, but I had no time to be depressed. My consciousness was open and time was passing infinitely slowly, but there was no time left.

For the time being, I made a sentence that would convey it with the minimum number of characters.

『Run away, your sister isn't your sister anymore.』

No… would M believe this email sent by someone somewhere she didn't know? Would she even open and read it?

At that moment, something intense overflowed from within me once more. Then, it changed into the next line.

『I'll definitely protect you. Frog』

That was my limit.

My consciousness scattered to the Internet, I was swept up in the rapid flow, and my consciousness flew off.

○

“…Eh?”

As the PHS in M’s hand began vibrating with a brrrrr, she looked my way with her large eyes.

With my vacant consciousness, I confirmed that I was in M’s hand right now. It seemed I had arrived at M’s PHS and lost consciousness. I mobilized my vague consciousness which was on the verge of disappearing and moved my body, dragging myself to take refuge inside the stuffed frog.

“…An e-mail? From Mr. Frog?”

Saying that, M took turns looking at her PHS and me – that is, the stuffed frog.

--Ah, it reached her…

Just knowing that was enough of a relief to make my body fall apart. I was even moved to tears. But, it wasn’t the time to break down and cry. (In short, that’s how it is. Run away from here! A who is possessed by ‘Yoishi’ will be here soon. Run away right now!)

I shouted out loud, but as M continued to speak, my vision went dark.

“…This email. It’s mostly gibberish.”

M smiled, as she showed me the screen of the PHS.

…Ah. Therein was a mail filled with mostly unintelligible characters like □ or ▲, and the end was barely legible, “◆itely protect you. Frog”.

“…itely? Aah, definitely? you’ll definitely protect me? ...Thank you.”

M had a kind smile on her face that was enough to make me want to cry – but, I was merely in a state of panic.

There really was no use in hastily hacking the internet system. With this, nothing had reached her. Even though I risked my life rushing around in the electronic world, no vital information reached M at all.

(That's not it, that's not it, M. I wasn't trying to cheer you up…no, I did want to cheer you up, but that wasn't it… I just, I just wanted you to live.)

I felt so disappointed, so pitiful, and the tears continued to drop down.

(Anyway… You need to run away from here right now! M!)

I shouted with all the strength I could muster, when it happened.

Knock, knock – the sound of the window being knocked.

I feebly turned around, to see A's face outside the car. She had an ecstatic smile on her face, as if fitting the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle after many years of hard work, but in M's eyes they must have been merely reflected as the kind smile of her older sister.

"…Onee-chan!"

M raised her voice in happiness, and ended up unlocking the door.

"See, I told you I would come back, didn't I?"

"But… suddenly saying you would go grab something you forgot is…"

"That's true. I'm sorry."

Smiling, A sat down in the back seat. Thereupon, she must have noticed the blood smeared on her elder sister's clothes; M placed her hand over her mouth in shock.

"Onee-chan, what happened…?"

"Yeah…this is that detective's blood."

"Detective…? T, that old man? Why? Did the old man hurt you?"

“Listen carefully, M.”

A said that, and placed her hand on M’s cheeks. She traced her fingers on her soft cheeks as if enjoying it.

“That man was the culprit.”

“…Eh?”

“That detective – no, I don’t know if he was really a detective or not. But, that man killed papa and mama – and he blamed Leo for it, and he was going to kill us, too.”

“…But…then, what about that person? What about the priest?”

“Ah… he ran away. I don’t know why he did though.”

Saying that, A fumbled around her pockets. I was on guard as she seemed to be looking for something, but then A took her hand out of her pocket, and looked around the car here and there.

“Didn’t that man smoke? He looked like he did though.”

Saying that, she leaned forward to the front seat. She opened the dashboard around the side lever, under the steering wheel, and on the passenger seat, and found a crumpled box of cigarettes inside; she raised her voice happily, “Found it.”

“…O, onee-chan.”

She put a cigarette in her mouth, lit it with the hundred yen lighter she took out together with the box and exhaled a tobacco puff; Feeling good, she then sat back down in the rear seat.

“…*cough*…Onee-chan, you smoke cigarettes?”

“I do--. They’re so good, it’s so relaxing, but above all, they make you happier when you’re already happy. You can really savor and digest your happiness.”

The interior of the car was instantly filled with white smoke, as if it was transforming into a perverse opium den.

“By the way.”

A crossed her legs, and with the finger she held the cigarette in, pointed towards me— the stuffed frog in M’s hand.

“Are you still good friends? I mean you're always muttering to that stuffed toy when you're alone, aren't you? Do you still talk to it?”

“…Y, yeah…*cough*…just now, he sent me an email.”

“An email? From the frog?”

Saying that, she snatched the PHS from M’s hands. Fiddled on it with her fingers, and displayed the email I had sent. And then, with a sigh of relief, she let out a chuckle.

“What, it’s mostly gibberish.”

“…Y, yeah. But, it’s the first email Mr. Frog sent me.”

“Heh. He sure worked hard for it.”

A’s cold words were definitely aimed at me.

“M, you really trust that frog, don’t you?”

“…*Cough* I do.”

“You trusted papa, and mama as well.”

“…….”

“Leo too – and you trusted that man who said he was a detective, didn’t you? Then, what about me?”

Without knowing what her elder sister was trying to say, M was simply bewildered as A pointed to herself.

“Of course – of course I do, I love you so much.”

“Ahaha. That’s your foundation, isn’t it? The precious foundation on which the heart depends. But you know what?”

“It’s all, completely, wrong.”

“Papa and mama you see, didn’t actually want to give birth to you. Didn't you ever think it was strange that you and I are nine years apart in age? Did you never think it was strange that we don't look alike at all?”

--Hey…hold on a moment…

“After all, it’s because—”

“You were a child born from rape.”

I didn’t know… if the meaning of that got through to M, who was still only in her first year of elementary school. However, she must have understood that she was being told something truly repulsive. The blood had now drained from M's complexion.

“It seems to have happened on an overseas business trip to America. When papa was away from home, mama was assaulted by men. By white brats who seemed to have a thing for Asians. That’s when mama got pregnant. In short, half of the blood inside you is white. That's why you look so pale, like your veins are visible.”

With those words—

I recalled the voice of who-knows-what that echoed in my head last night.

『…hat’s why, I was against it…you’re saying that now…?』

『…hat's why, you should have aborted it…I didn't want to get pregnant either…』

Were those… Were those the deepest screams of the mother and father's hearts who had lost their bodies…?

"It seems they were quite troubled about whether or not to give birth to you."

A dropped the elongated cigarette ash in place, and sneered.

"Papa was against it. Mama was troubled as well. Mama's family were Protestant Christians you see. They were against abortion. The days and months quickly went by while they were troubled, and it became too late to get an abortion. Eventually, papa and mama were determined to raise the child as their own, but even then, it wasn't a positive birth. Somewhere along the way, papa and mama hoped for the possibility of a miscarriage. Because they didn't know if they could love you after you were born. Because you were the product of an incident they wanted to forget, one that would haunt them for the rest of their lives. However -- you were born safe and sound. You let out an innocent cry, not knowing anything. But as you grew up, that blood stood out. Your face looked awfully less and less like an Asian after all."

"……"

"I wonder how complicated papa and mama must have felt whenever they praised you telling you what a cute child you were. It wasn't just them, I was in elementary school at the time, but I somehow knew what had happened. Papa continued to blame himself for why he wasn't home at that time, and mama continued to curse herself for opening the door back then. Around the time I entered middle school, I understood all of it. Ohh, I realized that this child was my sister, but not my proper sister. That's why, you're my younger sister, but not my real younger sister. You're not even my family."

…Stop it… just, stop already…

"Right – you know what you are? You are merely a *crystallization of malice*, merely living together in a conflict between worldliness,

hypocrisy and egotism."

In that moment—

I heard the noise of something breaking.

Before I realized, I stood in the way to protect M with enough force to blow away the exterior of the stuffed frog. I stood directly in front of A, and at the same time, I put everything in my fist as I punched her square in the face. I thought it was obvious that my fist wouldn't touch anything physically, and not reach A, no, 'Yoishi's' face – but…

Did it appear as if because my fist sunk into the target's face, A's face looked strangely distorted.

"…Hssp."

A groaned.

"Did you get mad? Ah? Did I make you mad?"

Yes, it was the moment A sneered at me.

"--You're not onee-chan."

In the world shrouded in white smoke, a voice like a ringing bell echoed.

"Who are you? No, I already know. You are – the thing that was inside Kii-chan. And, the one who destroyed papa, mama, Leo—and the old detective."

M was quiet as she firmly declared to the thing that had taken the form of her older sister.

"And, right now – you're using a mixture of truth and lies to try and break me."

(--That's right. That's right, M! Don't believe any of it, it's all

bullshit!)

I affirmed her thoughts as I jumped up and down. With dazzling thoughts, I looked at the girl I had always wanted to protect. Right now, M's pale cheeks were slightly flushed, her well-shaped lips were pursed together, and her large eyes were moist with tears, but even so, she was mustering all her courage in order to confront the thing that loomed before her, the thing that had taken the form of her sister.

(Hang in there, M!)

Call me a sycophant if you want. Call me an idiot if you want. Even so, right now, in the depth of M's eyes, I felt I could see the true strength of a person who had been beaten up in every which way.

However—

A suddenly diverted her gaze. And I realized that it was concentrated in M's hands. What lay there was the PHS – and the stuffed frog. My second self, no longer a stranger, was being gripped by M's small pale hand to the point where the shape had changed. And, I saw her fingers… slightly trembling.

"…Hmph."

She must have realized it at the same time, A let out a strange sigh from the corner of her lips.

"Mr. Frog, Mr. Frog, is it? The one who gives you courage is that stuffed frog, is it?"

'That's just fine', said A as she took a deep seat back, then took one last puff of the cigarette that was at its end, and smothered it on the back of the seat in front of her.

"I had a feeling somehow. I knew you had a propensity for noticing the unseen. You must have felt something inside that stuff frog, didn't you? You believe it's always protecting you, right? Do you know what is inside that thing?"

--Wa…wait a minute…

“Didn't you find it strange? Who was it that gave you that stuffed frog?”

--Agh… as expected, I knew that was what it was all about.

And at long last, I confirmed what ‘Yoishi’ truly wanted.

It was, M. M’s body. ‘Yoishi’ intended to become human. An innocent girl, still young, beautiful, with the ability to recognize the unseen, and if ‘Yoishi’s’ words were to be believed – an unwanted child, born from pure malice. It would crush the heart that dwelled inside, and create a person who was nothing. And to incarnate itself in her body was the wish of malice that had been simmering for years.

And, right now—

Sako’s words finally melted into meaning in my head.

『It means we can’t stay here anymore.』

『It means that we are all just pawns.』

『Because us staying here itself might be its trap.』

That meant that in short…

It was stealing away, one by one, the people surrounded by M who she had sincere trust in. It stole her best friend, Kii-chan, it stole her mother, her father, Leo, the detective who believed what she said—

And, it would steal the precious words she gave to me-- 『Friend』 .

Everyone was used as pawns in order to crush M’s heart. The strange ‘sense of unease’ that had been added to the incidents surrounding M would sway her sensitive heart. It was to remove the pillars of the foundation, one by one, and it would make M, who eventually emptied out, into its own flesh. That’s why Sako disappeared. He removed himself from the role before he could gain M’s trust.

The incarnation of malice.

The formation of a vessel, devoted to itself.

…But…if that were the case--- then, she was just like…

Wasn't M just like… a present day 'Tamamo-no-Mae'?

"Thanks--"

Right now, the something that had taken the form of her elder sister…

No—the mass of malice that was called 'devil', 'witch' and 'nine-tails', happily declared:

"…for looking after me all this time."

However,

"You're lying."

"…That's a lie."

M spoke in a trembling voice.

Tears had swelled up in her eyes, as she declared to the thing that had taken the form of her older sister.

"The things you said, they might have been the truth. What you said about mama, papa, the detective, and about my birth – but, but..."

Unable to bear it any longer, large teardrops spilled over and fell.

"But, Mr. Frog was… the thing Mr. Frog was always thinking about… was that he had to die in my place…that's all he was thinking about. That's why I trusted him."

…Ah….

“No matter how much I tell him he's wrong, all Mr. Frog was thinking about was that he wanted to die in my place…That’s why, I…I thought I had to keep it together… there was no one who thought that for me. That’s why, it’s not you. The person inside Mr. Frog… is definitely not you.”

In an instant…

The sound of something snapping reverberated. It sounded as if something had been torn somewhere.

I looked to see A’s long fingers pressing down on her face. She was writhing in pain, pushing down on her brows with her fingers and holding her hairline, as if she was trying to stop something from breaking through her forehead and coming out.

She was making such a strange voice, like a beast – like a machine about to break, but that sound was slowly growing louder. No, it was a mixture of high and low voices.

“…O, onee-chan?”

“…Gigigigii…”

“…Onee-chan, onee-chan? Come back…!”

“Ruuuu….M… Run awayyy.”

“Onee-chan, no! Leave Onee-chan! Yoishi, get out of her!”

M yelled, as she grabbed A’s clothes with all her strength, even as A writhed in pain.

However, in the next moment—

A snapped away her small hand, suddenly opened the back seat door and ran out. She staggered, as she started to run off somewhere with a terrifying look on her face.

“Onee-chan, wait!”

I ran as well, chasing after M who tumbled and ran out of the car.

“Don’t…come! Run…. Run away run away run away run away run away…!”

A shouted in the end as she clasped her face, and ran into the thick grove of trees.

Without faltering, M, too, jumped into the thicket of trees. I, of course, ran after her.

--Just… a little more. Was it just a little more? Could it be that, if we did something a little more…we could rip off ‘Yoishi’ from A’s body?

If so, the tragedy would stop here, it could be stopped.

However—what was it, this strange feeling?

The sun was shining in through a gap in the thick clouds, but only a thick haze lingered in the air.

As I desperately chased after M’s small back, I thought to myself once more.

Was ‘Yoishi’ really on the verge of being removed? What if it wasn’t, and this too was a part of its plan? What if this was all part of its elaborately thought-out plan?

Suppose ‘Yoishi’s’ goal is to obtain M’s body – suppose it wants to crush M’s heart and only needs the vessel of her flesh. It would now see that attempt as having failed at the very last moment. For better or for worse, M was able to escape from it after correctly recognizing that it was me inside the stuffed frog. Then – If I were ‘Yoishi’, what would I do next? The words ‘giving up’ were a thing distant and foreign to it. As long as M was alive, it would never take its eyes off her. If so, what would it do?

I cut through the trees, and the landscape opened up at once.

The lake reflecting the sunlight spread out before my eyes, and I suddenly remembered.

Lake -- water, pool.

…The last experiment ‘Yoishi’ carried out using Kii-chan at the pool late at night.

(--M, wait!)

I shouted out to her, but as expected, I couldn’t reach her.

M's small back was crying and chasing after A, who was running further ahead.

A ran towards the pier where several duck pedal boats were moored, and when she reached the edge, she looked back and shouted, “Don’t come here”. She had a strange expression on her face, as if she were looking at two different things, with her right eye and left eye being different in color.

“Don’t come here, M.”

A said it, once more.

At the sound of her voice, M stopped, out of breath. The distance between them was only a few meters.

“Onee-chan….please…stop…”

“Nhihi…. I’m I’m I’m….mm… so sorry so sorry…”

With her face convulsing as if collapsing, A grabbed her hair with her right hand, and pulled it with enough strength that the sound reached all the way to my ears. All the while her beastly bellowing continued, without an idea of where it was coming from. However—I saw it. Her left hand slowly struggled through the air, and groped through her pocket. And when I saw her take out a small foldable pocket knife – I ran to M and placed my hand on her back.

“Onee-chan…”

“M….I’ll…hold it… I’ll hold it, so… I’ll take it with me…. To the grave and fi-fiinish it, so…”

The tears were now streaming from A's left eye, and her right eye was glaring at us as if it would pop out at any moment. It was a look that conveyed how much of a fight was taking place inside A.

“I… strung papa up... and…. chopped mama… into pieces… and Leo…I stabbed…Le-le-leo as well…and the old detective…I saw…all of it.”

“O…onee…chan.”

“I’ll definitely…get the death penalty… I have no right to live….”

“No…no!! It wasn’t you… who did those things.”

“…No one…will believe me…!”

--No one will believe me.

Ah, that was what I felt about myself for a long time. No one would believe in my existence. No one would perceive me. I was branded as a useless thing in society, but if only that was the case, then it would be better, I was being weeded out as a harmful existence.

“...I…don’t…want that. That’s why…at least… I…want…to…be useful…somehow.”

The knife in A’s left hand clicked, and the blade glittered.

“Good…bye…M.”

“Oh…”

In the next moment—A thrust the knife into the base of her neck.

I don’t know if ‘Yoishi’ was inside A or not. However, right now, her eyes were moist with gentleness. Every time she tried to say something, fresh blood overflowed from her mouth. Her lips and neck were soon stained bright red, and as she cackled and coughed, she desperately forced a smile – and spoke:

“…I’ve…always, always…been so happy… to h-have a sist…”

Saying that much—

A’s body slowly dropped to the surface of the lake behind her.

“Onee-chan!”

M started to run; I followed her as fast as I could.

(--Stop!)

I tried stopping her, but my hands slipped through, and M jumped into the lake with her clothes still on.

(--Stop, stop, don’t do it!!)

I yelled.

(--Someone help! Please, it’s a child, someone help us! A child fell into the lake. Please, get her out!)

I yelled without thinking and leapt into the lake myself. In the next moment, countless bubbles spread in my vision, and I found myself dissolving into the dark blue world.

(--M!)

In desperation, I grabbed the white blouse in front of me. However, my hands slipped through. M’s long black hair danced about in the water. I confirmed her white profile, and realized what her eyes were staring at: A was at the end of M’s hands. She was smiling, even as the blood fluttered from her throat like a red string.

(--M, let her go! You’ll drown with her….!)

In that moment, I saw A's mouth move.

(Kill me.)

Her words reached M and I at the same time.

(Kill me, please.)

…Onee-chan….

(….Stop it…M…)

I desperately tried to grab M's body, but found that M's feelings were rapidly cooling. I understood that she was ready to carry with her the heavy, heavy cross that her sister had come to bear, a weight heavy enough to plant a hole in the ground with her foot.

(…St….op…)

"I'm sorry…Mr. Frog…."

At the same time as that voice echoed within me, M accepted the knife from A's left hand with her small hand.

"….I've…already…"

"Forgotten what it means to be afraid…."

She muttered, took the silver-colored blade, and gently thrust it into the bottom of her sister's neck.

○

I was in the sky.

I was floating in a world of white haze.

Beneath my eyes were many people.

There were countless people on the lake pier, rescuing the sisters who had fallen into the lake.

The smaller child is safe.

That kind of voice rang out.

The older child is dead.

She has a knife in her neck.

That kind of voice also rang out.

And, I finally understood at last.

The last raucous laugh that echoed in my head, and the meaning of those words.

--Now, you're a murderer, who killed her own sister---

At the same time as those words were spoken, I heard something being crushed.

It was a terrible sound, something I never wanted to hear again. It was the sound of a heart being crushed. It was the sound of M's heart being crushed, and the sound of my own heart being crushed. In the end, I could do nothing. I was merely nothing.

It wasn't about the M 'Yoishi' was trying to create—I myself was 'the person who was nothing.'

No matter how much I suffered. No matter how far I ran. No matter how much I gnashed my teeth. No matter how many bitter tears I spilled. What does not move cannot be moved, and what cannot be changed cannot be changed. Not even a little girl who lived a righteous life can be saved. If that were the case, what do people exist for? Why do they suffer? Is this world a hell? Were people just dwellers in an infinite hell no matter how far you go? Was the truth of this world altogether evil? Was malice itself its true nature?

…That was just fine.

If that were the case, then there was no point in going against it.

I gave up on everything; I abandoned everything.

If being righteous meant this much pain.

If it was a world that couldn't even accept the tears of just one young girl.

Then I had no interest in that. No regrets either. I just want to surrender myself to the permeating darkness, take all the malice in my body, and just sink like this no matter how far—

(--Giving up?)

I heard a familiar boyish voice.

(You worked quite hard, but, well, I guess you're at that kind of point.)

(However—like I said in the beginning, this is the past. No matter how much you despair, lament, grieve and moan, you are just peeking at the data of the unchangeable past.)

(What, can't hear me anymore…? That's fine, well then, I'll give you back your name--)

(Yukiko Nadare.)

The moment that name was called – an intense light poured down on me.

The name that I was supposed to abandon. That nostalgic name I had thrown away so long ago.

That's right, I was—*my name* was…

Yukiko Nadare – and I currently went by the name of… ‘Karasu’.

I was a woman: beautiful, voluptuous, and made my living by fortune telling—and, huh? What did it mean?

…Oh.

That’s right—that’s right, I remembered everything. I remembered it all. I woke up this morning, had a shower, changed into a black camisole and put on a fox fur stole, I was a bit late as I left the house, so I hurriedly got into a taxi, only to get even more late because of the heavy traffic. When I arrived at the building I rented for work, I said something like ‘Keep the change’, and jumped out of the back seat, when I heard someone’s voice, “Look out!”. I didn’t know if that was the voice of the taxi driver, or that of the old man passing by, but when I turned around, I saw a young man driving a large scooter at a reckless speed weaving through traffic, and it was at the point when I turned around, when I heard the sound of my spine snap. At the same time, I flew through the air, and thought carelessly to myself – Ah, the sky is so wide, and so blue. And—why was it I wonder? I realized that someone…someone very familiar to me, flew through the skies at the same time, in a different place. As I wondered who that was, my head smashed into the concrete after two and a half rotations, and something dark red spread out before my eyes.

--Ah, that’s right.

So this was how things ended for me.

Well, I didn’t think I was going to live a long life, and it was sudden while I was still young, beautiful and in good health, so I guess you could say it's the way I wanted to die. However, wasn’t this too long for having my life flash before my eyes, and moreover, wasn’t this someone else’s life?

The light closes in on me.

My consciousness fades into white.

From somewhere, I heard a nostalgic song that I’d never heard

before.

The mountains stretching out.

The noisy people on the lake shore.

It was all, someone else's concern—That's right, this was someone's past.

An ambulance arrived. And for some reason, a black car arrived as well. The police officers all saluted the man who had very good posture in the dark blue suit who got out of it.

"Police superintendent Mitsurugi."

The man with the deadpan expression on his face was called that. The man, whose looks made it hard to tell if he was young or old, did not return the salute as he continued along the pier. In his stead were unfriendly looking men of good physique.

"What happened to Tatsuya?"

"We just received a call. His body was discovered at the back of that mansion."

"The number of confirmed victims this time is four huh?"

"Yes, Katsuhiko Hanamura, his wife: Rie Hanamura, his oldest daughter: Ako Hanamura, and head patrol officer: Haruo Tatsuya."

"How few." Without batting an eye, the man with the expressionless face called police superintendent Mitsurugi spoke.

He then looked a short distance away from the pier, at the young girl with a blanket over her soaking wet clothes.

"Who's that girl?"

"Miko Hanamura—she seems to be the younger daughter. Judging from the situation it is highly likely that she is the one who stabbed the eldest daughter – but, it is believed that she is possessed by 'that thing'."

When he heard that, the man took out a pair of black leather gloves from his pocket, put them on, and approached the girl.

The men surrounding him moved the police officers besides the young girl away, and the man crouched down in front of the young girl. He then placed his hand on her cheek, and made her face him. He then drew so close to her to the point where he might kiss her, and gazed into the depths of her eyes.

“I can’t tell.”

“For the time being, I think we should take heavy quarantine measures.”

Suddenly, a different detective brought along a man dressed in a white robe and a black hakama. It was Sako. His face was pale and bloodless, and he was unable to offer any resistance, he was like a broken doll as he was made to stand up in front of the man.

“This man was found wandering around close to the mansion.”

“—Hmph.”

The man stood up nice and tall, and faced Sako. He glared head on at the young priest, who was as pale as a dead man, and asked him.

“And you are?”

“…..”

“From the way you’re dressed I figure you’re a priest from somewhere – but, did you think you could do something about ‘that’?”

“……”

He gave a cold stare to Sako who didn't answer, and eventually declared to the police officer standing behind Sako.

“See? This guy learned it was useless as well. It's not an opponent a priest can do anything about. Just identify him and let him go.”

The officer replied with ‘Yes’, and was about to drag off Sako once more, when—

“…‘That’….is…”

The man in the black hakama silently whispered.

“There’s no such thing… as ‘that’. There’s no way it exists. You run your organizations believing in something that doesn’t exist, acting as if it exists. It’s useless. It’s a complete farce.”

“That’s right, you understand it, don’t you? There’s no such thing as ‘that’.”

The man gave a thin smile, and Sako muttered.

“…The father murdered the mother, and after dismembering her, he took his own life—the elder sister became deranged after witnessing the scene, and stabbed the detective and the dog to death, when she returned to her senses, she killed herself. Will it be fine with that?”

“…Hm.”

The man nodded once before smiling and said, ‘Let’s go with that’.

“Let’s go with that as the official explanation for the media, Mr. Priest.”

“I’m—the head priest.”

“Whatever.”

The man motioned with his chin, and Sako was dragged off like that.

“What do we do about the younger daughter?”

The man stroked his pointy jaw in response to the question from the man in the black clothes behind him. He seemed to be ruminating on something, but eventually took out a cell phone and called somewhere. After a word or two with someone, his expression changed for the first time. His handsome eyebrows furrowed, and his mouth twisted as if in defiance of something -- but eventually, he

nodded. He hung up the phone, and called out to a middle-aged officer with his finger who oversaw the scene of the crime. I was amazed at how powerful this man was, because the older man was called "deputy chief" or something like that.

“The entirety of this incident will be under the jurisdiction of the Public Security Intelligence Agency.”

“…Ye…yes, however.”

“After you finish sending all the documents to us, you will dispose of them. Put a gag order on all officers.”

“U—understood sir.”

Thereafter, the man took a deep sigh, and faced the young girl once more.

He coldly ordered the six-year-old girl who was still sitting there soaking wet with a vacant expression on her face.

“Throw away the name Hanamura starting from today.”

--Ah…

“Your surname is ‘Mitsurugi’ from this day forward. You will be adopted by me as per the law.”

At that moment, feelings like a sludgy magma overflowed from within me once more.

--Ah…was that what happened…? Was that….what happened to you?

Someone was crying inside me.

Just listening to that sad voice was enough to make me collapse to my knees and weep.

“Throw away your given name as well. You have ten seconds. Anything is fine, decide.”

The girl stared back at the man in a daze, her emotions and circumstances seemingly irrelevant to him.

After clicking his tongue once, the man spoke.

“If you can’t decide, then I’ll do it for you.”

In response – the young girl, muttered in a hoarse voice.

“….ishi.”

“…What?”

“My…my name is…”

The young girl slowly raised her beautiful pale face.

Behind her long black hair, wet and flattened – under her arched eyebrows.

Her dark eyes shone with a strange light.

“My name is – Yoishi Mitsurugi.”

(--Was that what happened to you…?)

(--Was that what happened to you…?)

Someone’s sobs and screams rang up to the sky, and at the time, a torrent of light engulfed me. I was convinced that I would finally return from this hellish world to a world of tranquility. It felt like the figure of that tomboy named Takamura was close by. I felt a presence taking my hand, and taking me back to somewhere I belonged. Having regained the name that I should have discarded, I would probably not live long in the world I returned to – but it was still far better than this place. Better than this world where so many human souls had been crushed.

Thereupon, I suddenly realized.

My original reconstructed memory was stirred by those words.

"Those that meet Yoishi die seven days later."

“Yoishi isn't a living person.”

“Offline meetings Yoishi attends end in disaster.”

With the world ten years in the past in front of me about to fade as I was swallowed by the muddy stream – I cried out in desperation; I must take something back with me. I extended my hands as if to take something back with me.

I must bring back the origin of the rumor I had once heard—no, I must bring back the identity of the true enemy.

Perhaps that girl called Takamura was right. I, who was nothing more than weak radio signals in this world, could hardly bring back anything. However, if there was at least one thing – even if it were just a fragment, I wanted to take it back with me from this hellish record. If so, what would that be?

Would it be enough to say that the dark light behind the eyes of ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’ was the thing that needed to be confronted?

However—

However—

However, that wasn’t it, someone yelled. Someone inside me was shouting 'No, no, no'. And, I finally realized who that voice belonged to. The identity of the thing that had been clinging to my back all this time. I realized who the other soul was: that silly, nostalgic, and stubbornly naïve soul. With no time left, and not knowing what to take back anymore, I looked back at the very last moment, with my knees on the verge of collapse.

--Hey, you there.

--You there, who have been clinging to my back all this time.

“It’s time, to breathe again.”

…I mean, well, I’m probably a bit masculine in some ways, but using ‘onore 己’[19] in first person felt very much out of place. But now, I finally understood why that was. It was because you were clinging to

my back. You went through a life-and-death struggle coincidentally at the same time as me and linked to my soul.

You saw everything together with me, but you still won't be able to take any memories back to the present with you. However, if it's you and me – if it's the both of us, then we might be able to take a fragment of this world back with us.

I'll—entrust that to you.

Hey, do you understand? It's about you ya know.

You're the one who must save that child.

Hey—'Nagito Yamada-kun'.

Epilogue

I opened my eyes, to see a white curtain swaying by the window.

Each time, a dazzling light would pleasantly shine in, and gradually, my consciousness took shape.

And, she must have realized I had opened my eyes.

The baby-faced girl with the nostalgic red glasses smiled broadly.

“Are you conscious? Thank goodness.”

“…K…Krishna-san?”

“Everyone…everyone, thought you were taken along…!”

As soon as she spat out those words, that person embraced me.

It was Shiina Kurimoto-san, aka Krishna, a third-year student in Koumei university, the head of the Beatnik research club – the person I relied on the most here in Tokyo, who was much more famously known to the world as the organizer of the occult website, ‘Ikaigabuchi’. As I continued to feel the warmth of that small figure’s voluptuous breasts as she cried and sobbed in my chest, I desperately tried to think about when was now, where I was, and why I was in a place like this.

Umm, my name was – Nagito. Nagito Yamada, a university freshman, my hometown was Fujieda in Shizuoka prefecture – and as I recalled that far back in sequence, that scene came back to me.

That’s right, I was running to the library to meet her, when—

“…Ah…wait! Krishna-san!”

It wasn’t the time to be thankful for the two soft bulges leaning over

my crotch. I grabbed Krishna-san's slender shoulders and raised her up, and asked what she meant by her earlier words.

"What do you mean when you say that everyone…everyone, thought I was taken along?"

In response, Krishna-san's large eyes behind her red glasses gradually welled up with tears.

"Akane Nanamori passed away."

"….Eh?"

"But it wasn't your fault. You protected her and she didn't die instantly. However, since birth, the vessels between her heart and lungs were underdeveloped – so her body couldn't stand the operation. It couldn't accept the heart-lung machine."

--Akane Nanamori…died.

I closed my eyes, recalling that young girl's prim manners, her slightly sad, downcast profile, and I recalled her bright, bursting smile. I recalled that she was carrying something that couldn't be carried at such a tender age, and opened my eyes as I savored that heaviness – when for some reason, I realized that Sako Takita was present there.

"Yo."

He was leaning against the well with a complacent smile on his face dressed as usual in his blue Kinagashi.

"…E, even you—why are you here?"

For some reason, seeing his face made the bitterness surge even more so than usual. A man who would betray you at the most crucial moment, a man you definitely couldn't trust – that type of bitterness seethed and welled up inside me.

"Wow, it's so nice that you're safe. Don't go acting too reckless now, eh?"

“Shut up. And haven’t you— gotten older?”

“Older? How rude. I’ve still called Saint-Germain of the Far East."[20]

After cracking a joke – he turned his eyes to Krishna-san who was bending over shakily.

“Kurimoto-kun. For the time being, I believe it would be better to tell him everything that happened.”

In response to Sako’s words, the petite occult site manager took off her glasses and wiped her tears with a handkerchief.

A terrible air filled the room once more, even as the news of Akane Nanamori’s death still lingered.

“Nagi-kun, I want you to stay calm when you listen to this.”

“…Alright.”

“Karasu-san passed away.”

…Eh?

“It seemed she was hit by a motorbike in front of the station right around the time your accident happened.”

“….”

Eh…no… wait a minute. What was she talking about? I couldn't understand it. Because, it felt like I was together with Karasu-san till just now. I even felt like I'd had the smell of her hair on the tip of my nose all this time. I had a long, long dream—and, it felt like she was there the whole time…

“It has something to do with the origin of Karasu-san’s name. She told me once before. She told me that she was actually long dead. That she was just running away from death under the name of ‘Karasu’. That’s why, she told me not to be surprised or sad if she were to suddenly die one day. But—”

Thereupon, Krishna-san was unable to bear it as her voice cracked.

“…I mean… that’s impossible…”

In the hospital room that was dead silent, only Krishna-san’s sobbing echoed.

After crying for a while—she wiped her tears, and after putting her glasses back on, she spoke.

“As of today – I’m closing ‘Ikaigabuchi’.”

“…I can’t do it anymore. It was always a site dealing with things that were too dangerous. It has nothing to do with Karasu-san’s death, I thought that it was about time.”

“Wa, wait a second. Are you not going to update it anymore? Weren’t you updating the ominous history – the misfortunes, the hopeless events into something a little happier? Weren’t you promoting the segregation of humans and ghosts?”

“Sorry—I, can’t…do it anymore.”

Once again, I was left alone in front of Krishna-san, whose eyes welled up in tears.

Suddenly, the door of the hospital room opened with a clank.

I looked back as if drawn to it—

There was a young girl, her black hair reaching down to her waist, with a beautiful face like that of a bisque doll.

Looking somewhat out of place, she held a flower in her hand and untied her knotted lips.

“…Get well…”

Saying that, she drew close to me.

“…soon.”

She then bluntly held out the flower.

However, I didn't see her being out of character holding out that flower.

I was on the verge of her calling something cursed that came from her translucent white beauty, and the moment I felt something lurking in the depths of her large eyes that gazed at me—
Goosebumps ran all over my body like I had never felt before.

"—G, get out!!"

Confused, I screamed.

And, ugh—I ended up uttering those words spontaneously.

Get away, *you monster*.

『Raven Notes』 -- 「The Raven's Memorandum」 or 「The story that gets devoured」 「Part Two」

That sound I heard from across the receiver--

The materials of the school building, which were being reinforced against earthquakes, had suddenly collapsed.

Countless students had assembled in the courtyard of the university Kimihiko attended, and as I pushed my way through the crowd, I heard them say, "A student was caught under it", "The ambulance still isn't here?", "Hurry up and help him out", but also mixed in were voices that plunged relentlessly in my ears, "It's too late", "There's no way he could have survived that."

And then -- through a gap in the crowd, I saw it.

Sticking out from a gap in the pile of reddish-brown steel beams, was Kimihiko's sneaker. A familiar set of jeans. And as if engulfed around it, a reddish-black liquid was seeping into the ground. I was overcome by a strong urge to vomit, and was unable to take a single step forward, eventually I was swept away to the edge of the crowd by the arrival of the paramedics and the university staff leading the way.

After that -- I can't remember much. My head was hot, and there was only confusion as all the sounds blended together. I don't know how much time passed – and before I'd realized, I'd dizzily wandered off, with my hand still clutching the cell phone that was connected to Kimihiko's line. When I snapped out of it, I found myself at the rooftop garden of a station building where Kimihiko and I

occasionally visited, and from there, I stared blankly in the direction of the university building.

The scene reflected in my eyes was fogged white, as if I were dreaming. The early-summer wind swayed my hair, and the feeling of the wind sweeping through my uniform finally put words back in my throat.

"..... What..... Why..... Why is this happening? What's the man in blue clothing? How on earth could this happen?"

With a soggy, contorted face, I gripped the wire fence at the edge of the rooftop, and repeated the questions directed at no one. Maybe everything was just a dream. Maybe I just misunderstood, and if I went back to university now, I might find Kimihiko standing smiling at me. Those sneakers and jeans, they might have belonged to someone else -- I tried to tell myself that, but my legs didn’t move an inch from there.

Suddenly, I heard some kind of flapping sound above me, and raised my head.

There were several ravens perched on the rooftop fence. Their obsidian eyes were all directed toward me, and they cawed as if jeering at me. Their cawing made it appear as if they were trying to tell me something important, and yet, as if they understood that it would never get through.

"Please... tell me..."

I glared at the ravens and spoke.

"If you know something... if you know what's happening, if you know..."

Please, tell me.

As I was about to shout that -- I heard it.

"What's my name?"

With a shuddering chill--

I slowly turned around, and before me was a blue so bright it felt like it would pierce my eyes.

●

...That's right.

That day -- I was asked that.

I definitely met the "Man dressed in blue," and was asked that question.

【…Continue?】

From across the Internet, that text emerged.

【What I want to know is past that.】

Abruptly, those words shook.

--Was it truly alright to remember?

Right now, I was helplessly being controlled by the other's pace. I felt like I was on a trolley headed straight toward the abyss. And it was a trolley on a track with no turnouts to be found anywhere you looked. There was no escape, and I couldn’t help but feel that I had no chance of winning this conversation from the start.

"It can’t be that the guy on the other side is really..."

A nasty feeling crawled up from under my feet--

Despite that, I was unable to stop the scene spreading itself out into my mind.

●

Blue, blue, blue, blue.

They seemed to float in the white hazy world. The coat, shirt, necktie, slacks, and the hat pulled over their eyes -- someone stood there, entirely in a blue that seemed to be submerged in the sky.

"Y... you're..."

In that place where time seemed to have stopped, I heard my voice as if it belonged to someone else.

"What is my name?"

The tone of their voice felt nostalgic, very familiar, and had a creepiness in it that I didn't want to admit. With that kind of chilling undertone, they calmly asked.

"Y... you... could you be..."

In response, they slowly tilted their hat, and showed me the face underneath.

Yes – it was…

Holding the hat in one hand, their long, black hair flowed downwards.

It was me.

Covered entirely in blue clothing, and smiling, was, without a doubt, "me".

As I held back the immense urge to vomit rising from the bottom of my stomach, I finally understood. The voice, which sounded

somewhat familiar, was uncomfortable, as if I were listening to a recording of my own voice. I felt the terror of seeing an impossible phenomenon, as if one's shadow was moving differently from oneself, as if something that was not supposed to rebel had begun to rebel.

"What is the name of my child?"

Chuckling at my expression – the one dressed in blue continued questioning.

However, that face was...

"..............!!?"

On top of that blue dress, where my face had been until now, now had the pale face of my mother, who was supposed to be dead.

I see -- I remembered now. At last, the despair from that time I had almost forgotten was taking shape.

Your self asks for your own name. Your mother asks for the child's name. In either case, the answer is "Your name". That's why people end up answering their name when questioned by the one dressed in blue.

And this time, the blue-clothed took something out of its suit pocket. But I understood without even seeing it. I believed the final question would be about the box.

"What is inside this box?"

What the blue-clothed presented together with that expected question -- was a sleek, white, porcelain funerary urn. The face of the blue-clothed was now crumbled. The pieces of flesh had peeled away to

reveal a white, cracked skull.

--Grim Reaper.

I knew it. This was a Grim Reaper. And the "three questions" were there to lead me into saying "My name" in every way. However -- I couldn't figure out why it was using such indirect means. And the meaning behind the blue clothing, where it came from, and why only I could see it. I didn't know, but in any case, the one thing I knew was that if I answered those questions, the next one to be taken would be me. I frantically stood my ground as my legs trembled, and pursed my lips. I clenched my teeth hard, defiant against answering a thing.

More so than fear -- my body trembled out of frustration.

In some ways, I had thought that facing death head on would be something more refreshing, something that would push me beyond resignation. You know, like hearing soothing hymns in an endless world filled with light, or seeing the Sanzu River in a world of white haze. But instead, I was disappointed that it was in this roundabout and cowardly way. At any rate, that urn probably had my name written on it. This asshole was probably trying to get me to say my name in different ways. It was too underhanded. Too vile. I wished from the bottom of my stomach that I could do something to hit back, even a little bit, when—

I noticed the name etched onto the urn.

由貴子 ○○ (Yukiko ○○).

My name was there, but one of the letters was wrong.

My name was由起子 ○○. It was given to me with the wish that no matter what happened, I would be a girl that always got up with my own strength.[21] I remembered my mother’s effusive smile, as she explained that to me. It was a smile from a time when there was no rift between me and my mother.

.....Why did my mother and I grow so distant?

....When did I start keeping myself distant from her?

It was since the day that I learned my mother still kept a letter from an old lover. My mother said that it wasn't an easy thing to throw away a person's feelings, but I couldn't help but feel like that was an act of betrayal toward our family. But I realized when I saw that letter during the time of her funeral. That old lover had long since passed away. He was an existence that couldn't affect our family anymore. Maybe my mother couldn't throw it away because he had passed away. Maybe she thought that if she were to throw away the proof of his life, then he would truly be dead.

Those thoughts suddenly swept through me -- and the world gradually blotted out.

As long as we're alive, we can overwrite our sadness with happy memories. But the dead can't come back. You can't talk to them anymore – Wasn't that what mother wanted to tell me?

"Hey, you....."

The simmering anger welled up inside me, and I opened my mouth.

"If you're a grim reaper -- don't get people's names wrong!"

My.

My name.

My precious name, which my mother gave me.

The moment I was about to shout my correct name--

That color flowed into the white, foggy world.

--Red?

It was the color of a ransel.

There was a young girl with a bright red ransel on her back.

●

【*--Her.*】

Just as the old man on the other side of the LCD typed,

"..... I see." I also whispered.

-- I see, so that's how it was.

I finally remembered everything. I realized why the memories had almost disappeared from my mind.

"That was close."

"You were asking for my name again, weren't you."

My head became flushed with red at the brutal truth.

Yes -- I hadn't forgotten.

My story had already been thoroughly devoured.

"You came here to remind me of ‘my name’, the name you failed to steal that day, the name I sealed away myself, and to make me say it myself --That's why you're here, isn't it?"

●

"Don't fall for it."

At that moment, my mind was filled with someone's posts that appeared on that occult site's bulletin board. Those words overlapped with the vivid image of a young girl with a red ransel.

Yes, someone somewhere who posted on that message board had said that.

Be careful of the final question.

The box. The name inscribed on it.

My name, written incorrectly.

.....It was deliberate.

The blue-clothed wrote my name wrong on purpose.

Or rather... would a Grim Reaper really do that? Maybe it wasn't a Grim Reaper at all? Then what was this thing? And -- who was that elementary school kid, and how did she know?

At that moment, I saw the blue-clothed slowly turn around. Acknowledging the unexpected presence of the young girl, it straightened its posture slightly.

The girl moved softly, silently accepting the gaze that looked as if would take the breath of life away.

Slowly raising her small right arm, she pointed somewhere.

It was towards -- the top of the rooftop fence. There, where only a few ravens perched just a moment ago, now had enough of a flock to cover the sky in black, gazing at me as if they were ready to carry me to the other side. They must have seen everything that happened until now. And rather than interject, they simply observed. What the blue-clothed was, who the girl was, and what was happening here now, they understood it all, yet they just watched. Up until now --

and from here onward, they would simply watch countless thoughts crumble into the eternal river of time.

You shouldn't speak of it. If you speak of it, you become involved.

--Then, then, what should I do?

What should I do, having become involved up until now?

At that moment, I felt like I heard the echo of a wind chime that might have been misplaced and forgotten somewhere.

Was that the young girl's voice -- that was the one thing I couldn't remember no matter how much I tried. But, those words that sounded like a wind chime suddenly descended into my head.

"Throw away your name."

--Throw away my name? Why did I need to throw away my name?

But oddly, I understood that it was correct, and that it was the only way to escape from here. Otherwise, I would be pursued relentlessly until I died. But -- but, that was impossible. This name was mine, and mine alone. It was the mark of who I was, engraved into me with earnest hopes and prayers when I was born into this world. To throw that away would mean to throw away all that I held dear. If I threw away my name -- I would become nobody. My connection with my family, my friends, and loved ones that I spun up to this point would be cut off.

I tearfully complained, but the girl with the ransel silently stared at me.

The girl simply let her long, beautiful black hair dance in the wind. Even though we were so far apart, the elegance of that child’s facial features was strikingly apparent. Extremely, extremely, beautiful -- no, that explanation didn't do her justice. The young girl was like a bisque doll that a famous craftsman placed heart and soul into as their life’s final work. There was a bizarre dissonance that inspired awe in the viewer, one that made you feel like she couldn't possibly

exist in this world. It was in the girl's eyes. Her face, as if blessed by God, and her eyes, as if loved by the Devil, elevated her beauty to awe.

The girl looked at me with her dark eyes that looked as if they might swallow me, and nodded her head.

".....Ah."

When I realized it, I felt a blast of cold air tear across my skin. When I realized that it was not exuding from the blue-clothed, but rather from the black eyes of the girl with the red ransel, the tears I'd been holding back for so long spilled out helplessly. I'd been holding back, thinking that if I cried, I would lose – but, I couldn't hold back anymore.

--That girl already had no name. She'd long since thrown it away. Even... even though she was so young. Even though she was still only six or seven. She had already gone through something that forced her to throw away her name, and had shown up just to tell me about it.

"My name is?"

And, then -- the blue-clothed me asked me, with a furious expression.

I managed to steady my knees, which were on the verge of collapsing, and looked at the black-haired girl as if clinging to her. She was still pointing. Pointing at the ravens.

As I cried, I thought of my mother’s wide smile.

--If you die, it's over. As long as you're alive, you'll find happy things. You can just store the name within your soul. Give it to the person who wants it.

I nodded--

And managed to block out the name that rose in my heart, and that

day, I declared:

"I'm, Karasu."[22]

"I know everything, yet I travel the darkness between this world and the next without telling, ‘Karasu’."

◎

I was in my room.

【Ahh -- failed, again.】

When I came to, he disappeared from the internet, leaving behind only those words, which felt like they were accompanied by a wry smile. Wiping my sweaty palms with a handkerchief, I slowly closed the browser. I was able to simply close it without any issues. I tried opening the browser again and checked my browsing history: it contained the dating site, but no history after that.

I rubbed my eyes, and slightly opened my mouth in exasperation. I took out a cigarette with my trembling fingers, and placed it in my mouth. Without lighting it, I leaned back in my chair, and looked up at the ceiling.

--Jeez, really. Just, jeez.

Since that day, I had lived my life having thrown away my real name. That's why I'd forgotten all the memories engraved in that name.

"A memorandum indeed -- quite a memorandum."

☆☆☆

Having written that far, I stopped my fingers.

On the LCD display of my tablet, all that was displayed was my own words, inscribed in a voluminous amount.

I quickly scanned through it again, and suddenly felt odd. At the same time, I felt vaguely fearful about why I was even trying to write down a memorandum in the first place. I'd never even kept a diary before. After being in two minds about whether or not to delete it -- I ultimately saved the text, and tossed it in my personal folder. I then turned off the device and put it away in my bag.

I was alone in a taxi, passing through the city at night when it was already dark.

I squinted at the headlights of passing cars, gazing absent-mindedly at the illumination in front of the train station, and suddenly thought. If I hadn't thrown away my name back then -- would I have died young like Haruka-chan, my mother and Kimihiko?

I didn't know. Did they die because the "blue-clothed" appeared, or did the "blue-clothed" appear because their deaths had been decided; I didn't even know that. Speaking of not knowing -- where I was right now, and whether I was really alive, were unclear sometimes. For instance, do the people walking outside of this taxi window truly exist? The countless bluish-white artificial lights look like special fluorescent lamps for tropical fish, and the people feel like a school of Neon Tetras swimming in an aquarium. Like an aquarium that's named, 'Endless dream'.

No -- come to think of it, I hadn't dreamed in a while. But that was not because I was always in a deep sleep; I was surely seeing something similar to a dream, but I felt a sense of loss, as if I had been completely deprived of that spectacle at the cost of waking up in this world again.

But, once in a while--

Sometimes when I woke up, I felt the vestiges of something.

That was the sound of crying. I realized that it was like the voices of

countless ravens crying somewhere.

The cries that were trying to tell me something important, yet those cries that could never be understood, might have been engraved deeply and sharply in my pure white dream world. Maybe it was the resentful lament of a raven somewhere that had taken my place.

In the end, I never found out whether that blue-clothed was the devil, a grim reaper, or some wandering ghost. Even so, I was sure that the true form of the blue-clothed was the time of death itself, like a check with no name on it. I still didn't know why such an irrational being wandered around this world, but it was something that functioned the moment you inscribed your name on it.

And I, who had inscribed a false name on it--

What kind of death will I have on that day when it comes?

I, myself, who will have died, would hardly understand such a thing, but for some reason, I thought it would not be a pretty death. There would be no beautiful face on my body that people could decorate flowers with at my funeral, and I'm sure they would say it was better not to see -- no, it might even be the kind of funeral where my corpse doesn't even look like one. Something that had been waiting for me to die for a long time swarmed me at once, scattering about as if devouring "death" itself--

And then, I abruptly remembered that word.

Lucifer Blue.

Wasn't that blueish-white light used to light aquariums called that? [23]

"I see."

I smiled coldly, and gently reached my finger to the people on the other side of the window glass, meandering about like tropical fish. The tip of my finger touched the glass, and I realized once more that I could not reach them.

From their point of view, I might be the tropical fish in the glass.

And they must be trying to reach out their fingers to me from time to time. The fingertips that I could never see. But it seemed that the other side couldn’t find my location either.

○

"Welcome! Will you be dining alone?"

As soon as I entered the family restaurant for the offline meeting, I was greeted by a cute waitress.

"Hmm, well..."

I glanced around the restaurant, with its bright pop music and -- ahh, someone had arrived ahead of me.

The newbie to the occult site ‘Ikaigabuchi’ was known for being a bit of a wuss and was sitting alone, writing what seemed to be a letter rather fervently.

I tried to creep up behind the host of today's offline meeting, when--

Suddenly, a cold wind swept through my heart.

Together with that damp presence of death, the scene from that day suddenly came back to me.

That young girl with the red ransel who appeared on the rooftop back then.

Her cold, inorganic beauty and lonely appearance were vividly drawn before me.

"--Ah, so that's how it is."

What if the young girl from back then was real, and still alive somewhere?

And what if she was still suffering alone beyond the darkness?

Thereupon, I swallowed my words, and silently closed my eyes.

The ravens always know everything. And they never speak of it.

That is why they are ominous, and beautiful. Because they can see all of what their words would bring about. Because in the end, one’s destiny cannot be altered by another. Because they know how sinful it was to casually speak of what they could see.

Starting over from today – that became my guideline.

.....Eh? Wasn't fortune-telling a combination of cold reading and hot reading, an occult style of therapy? Yep, that's exactly right.

But I did say generally, didn't I?

That means, of course, that there are exceptions--

Because this world is an abyss after all, one that is endlessly entertaining.

Afterword

The materials I read for this work made me aware of the words, ‘Primacy effect’ and ‘Terminal effect’. In psychology, they refer to ‘the susceptibility of being influenced by information gained at the beginning and the end’, however, what I’m talking about here is the popular belief of ‘Having to finish something by a specific deadline, the efficiency is the highest at the beginning and the end’. When you hear it, that’s right, it feels like the most homework you do in summer vacation is at the beginning and the end days—is what you end up believing is the rule of thumb, but, there is still no scientific basis whatsoever for this theory, in short, it’s an idea that’s closer to pseudoscience. The danger of pseudoscience, or the occult, might be hidden in this. It might actually be experienced countless times by various people, but it’s not proven numerically, or scientifically. There are many such things in the world that are actually experienced by various people in countless numbers, but have not been proven numerically or scientifically. For example, at a time when zoology had not yet been developed, if you were to meet a baboon with a thoughtful look in his eyes in the mountain, you might end up convinced that it was a ‘mountain god’, survivors who had their comrades eaten by an alligator in the jungle might spread rumors that it was a ‘dragon’ that did it. When thinking along such lines, the occult is a manifestation of human imagination in response to uncharted territory, and a romance.

Now, after having depicted the unknown territory that has long been left behind for mankind, "Phenomeno" finally had the opportunity to write a story from the side of the unknown in this volume. Humanity has always only been afraid of the faint beings, but one part of my passion in wanting to write this story was the idea that the side of the faint beings might have their own logic. However, another important passion remains, and as I’m writing the final volume now, I’m tormented by anxiety and fear whether I will be able to fully depict it.

That's right, the next volume, will finally bring this story to a close -- but even here, I'm still worried about that last act. I'm anxious all the time as I go along, but I'd like to express my deep thanks to everyone at Seikaisha, beginning with my editor Outa-san for encouraging me despite my situation. Furthermore, I made a mistake about one part of the text this time, and ended up causing trouble especially for the assistant editor Hirabayashi-san. I'd like to express my apologies for that.

I would also like to thank the person in charge of the illustrations, Yoshitoshi Abe-san. Right around the time I was writing this afterword, I received two possible illustrations for the cover this time. Both were exceedingly wonderful, and I heard that he had redrawn them many times, just as he did for the third volume. I am always intensely humbled by the attitude of a person of such a high level of skill, who is willing to go the extra mile to depict something important that cannot be put into words. Truly, thank you so much.

Lastly, to all the readers accompanying this tale that is like a candle burning in the darkness.

I have written this story to the best of my ability up until now, but I would like to give it all I've got for the last volume after this one. If you could please watch over Yoishi and Nagito and their future, nothing would make me happier.

With that, I will return to my manuscript once more.

14th May, 2014

Ninomae Hajime

Afterword To the Afterword

After I finished writing the previous volume, ‘The Four Corridors Incident’, there was something that worried me. It was something I decided myself, but I had the strange restriction that I couldn’t use the three main characters that had led the story up until now, ‘Yoishi’, ‘Nagito’, and ‘Krishna’. On one hand, I thought that would be interesting, but on the other hand, I suddenly felt uneasy when I got to the stage of writing it, wondering if I could really write such a thing and if people would read it, even though it was a series.

If it were me from when I started to write the series, I somehow feel I might have given up. However, for some reason I still felt like I wanted to write it, and when I finished it, I felt as if I had climbed a mysterious, invisible staircase.

That wasn’t anything like me having grown, it might have been closer to the so-called sense of ‘Something made me write’. I had heard rumors of it before, but it was my first time experiencing it, and in that sense, this work called ‘A person who is nothing’ left a particularly strong impression on me among the series.

Now then, this volume received a comment from the author Otsuichi.

Before I started this job when I was still a reader, I bought a book by impulse at the bookstore with the exciting title ‘Zoo’ and got to know Otsuichi-san. What really amazed me about the story Otsuichi-san painted was the uniqueness of the setting and the beauty of the narrative structure that gave me goosebumps when I finished reading it. Since then, I have read all his works and have always been a big fan of them all without exception! The first time I received a comment from him on my obi was for another work, but it is very strange that at that time I thought I had already "reached the finish line", but it’s very strange that somehow this time I feel like I have

"started".

I was very happy with your comments.

Thank you so much for your time.

March, 2016

Ninomae Hajime

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Here, the character is wondering how they refer to themselves, with the Japanese pronouns ‘boku’, ‘ore’, or ‘atashi’ form.
2. ↑ Same pronoun reference as before
3. ↑ The kanji can be read in multiple ways and is used to refer to oneself in Japanese. Ore is used more often and onore is uncommon. I will just use ‘I’ to simplify from here on.
4. ↑ Denpa means signals and the psychic receivers of those signals are called denpas.
5. ↑ Between 1989-2019
6. ↑ As explained, this is a traditional Japanese worldview. The concept comes from ‘Haregi’, which means one’s best clothes worn on rituals like one’s wedding, the hare meaning spring and gi meaning clothes. The everyday clothes you would wear in your daily life would be ‘Kegi’, a term not used in modern times, where ‘Ke’ can mean ordinary and gi is clothes. The defilement is from the word Kegare which is kind of like a pun to the aforementioned Kehare(usual and unusual).
7. ↑ Shingon Sect
8. ↑ Nara period (710-794 CE)
9. ↑ The kanji is mentioned here instead of hiragana, 夜石: Yoishi
10. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yama-uba
11. ↑ North east is considered unlucky in some Asian cultures.
12. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hakushu_(Shinto)
13. ↑ The kanji for Yoishi uses the characters 夜 (Yo) for night, and 石(Ishi) for stone.
14. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sessho-seki
15. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic_of_Mountains_and_Seas
16. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_Handy-phone_System
17. ↑ https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%9D%92%E9%BE%8D%E5%88%80

18. ↑ https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E4%B8%89%E5%B0%96%E5%88%80
19. ↑ As mentioned before, this pronoun was used throughout this volume.
20. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Count_of_St._Germain
21. ↑ The kanji 起 means to rise, get up. In contrast, the ‘ki’ 貴 etched on the urn means precious, valuable.
22. ↑ Legacy translation note: Karasu in Japanese can refer to crows and ravens -- I previously thought the author was referring to crows but I guess not!
23. ↑ Legacy translation note: That took forever to find -- I can't find any confirmation that this is true outside of Japan, but it does seem that a while ago those blue LEDs were called "Lucifer Blue"